

## The Possibility of Little Utopias

I can't say that Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* provided me with any particular, brilliant insight, and I suppose someone better read in social theory or analytical Marxism than I might have found parts of the book belabored. Even I would agree that it was often repetitious, though I think I think Russell Jacoby was simply talking nonsense when he called the book a "morass." Overall though, nearly three years since I first read it, I still consider it a masterful work. Wright's case for separating the socialist project from the conceptual apparatus of traditional Marxism--from its theory of history to its necessarily revolutionary implications--in favor of a "compass" which orients us as we move down numerous different, possibly hybrid routes, towards a greater level of social power and democratic egalitarianism, was entirely persuasive to me. Of all those routes, the one which most intrigues me is one which invites reflections that are rarely identified as "socialist," but more usually localist, communitarian, even Burkean (hence my title of this review). But let me come around to that conclusion the long way.

In his respectful but firm turning away from Marxist thought, including both its deterministic trajectory and its complete theory of capitalism's ultimate demise, Wright's book reminds me very much of G.A. Cohen's late work, with its emphasis upon moving "back to socialist basics." Cohen's aim, as I understood him, was to re-emphasize community and equality as the two essential characteristics of all socialist theory, whether or not any given policy which could move society in that direction related to the historical argument over the origins and ultimate fate of capitalism. However, Wright appears in this work more willing than Cohen apparently was to credit capitalist markets with a possible role in one or another kind of radical egalitarian and democratic emancipation; Cohen, for his part, saw "community" as necessarily involving the "anti-market principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get out of doing so but because you need my service...[T]he idea in the primeval socialist slogan constitutes a complete rejection of the logic of the market...[since the] socialist aspiration was to extend community to the whole of our economic life" ("Back to Socialist Basics"--[http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU\\_files/Cohen--basics.pdf](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU_files/Cohen--basics.pdf)). This is an arguably rather stringent way of expressing the power of "community" which many egalitarians admittedly don't share (I think in particular here of Andrew Sahl's rejoinder to Cohen, "If You're Such a Liberal, How Come You Love Conformity?"), and Wright doesn't strike me as one who sees such a level of incompatibility between the individual variety which markets both enable and depend upon, and socialist principles. While Wright does come across in this book as somewhat leery of wholly market-based socialist proposals (such as John Roemer's "market socialism"), he appears even more doubtful of non-Marxist proposals that would seek to replace the market with a different form of economic participation entirely (such as in Michael Albert's "parecon" proposals). I don't know how Wright would best characterize his own beliefs about community; he quotes the above passage from Cohen approvingly, but rarely employs explicitly communitarian language in the book, preferring instead to speak of the social power of "civil society". Given his definition of socialism as an "economic structure in which social power in its multiple forms plays the dominant role in organizing economic activity", it is not surprising that his primary way of conceptualizing civil society is disaggregated, variable, and associational: for him, civil society is no more or less than "a form of power...rooted in the capacity of people to form associations to advance their collective goals." While capitalism does challenge community values of solidarity, reciprocity, and mutual care, those values will invariably make themselves

felt as a source of social power in civic life through "a multitude of heterogeneous associations, networks, and communities, built around different goals, with different kinds of members based on different sorts of solidarities." This vision of civic life leads Wright, as I read him, to be somewhat more acknowledging of the information-coordinating and organizing capacities of the market than Cohen apparently ever was; to see egalitarianism as requiring a firmly anti-market stand would work counter to the disparate, sometimes shifting and inchoate quality of the social power which Wright believes is a central component to explorations of diverse radical egalitarian and democratic possibilities.

Of course, this conceptualization of the forms of social power gives rise to an important question: would democratically empowered networks and associations of diverse communities and groups, exactly the sort of thing which gives rise to flourishing markets in the first place, actually be a force for egalitarian emancipation? Would they actually affirm such principles? Because, as Wright notes, many actually existing expressive associations in civil societies around the globe clearly do not. The anarchist response is that such is the wrong way of looking at things--a civil society that can "achieve sufficient coherence as to provide for social order and social reproduction" is all that one needs hope for. But a proper socialist response, a radical democratic egalitarian one, would have to be different; it would have to "require a state...with real power to institute and enforce the rules of the game," to construct or at least preserve that which is democratic and egalitarian in the midst of "pluralistic heterogeneity" of the "public square". Wright continues:

*There is no guarantee that a society within which power rooted in civil society predominates would be one that upholds democratic egalitarian ideals. This, however, is not some unique problem for socialism; it is a characteristic of democratic institutions in general. As conservatives often point out, inherent in democracy is the potential for the tyranny of the majority, and yet in practice liberal democracies have been fairly successful at creating institutions that protect both individual rights and the interests of minorities. A socialist democracy rooted in social empowerment through associations in civil society would face similar challenges: how to devise institutional rules for the game of democratic deepening and associational empowerment which would foster the radical egalitarian conception of emancipation.*

And so Wright acknowledges that, as we commit ourselves to experimenting upon different paths and testing different theories in pursuit of greater community and equality, as the socialist compass directs, certain kinds of institutional brakes or controls need to be kept in mind. Some of these brakes and controls should probably be liberal ones, thus pointing towards the well-understood controls provided by the language of rights and constitutional balances. Wright, however, appears reluctant to grant even a rather progressive liberalism too significant a role in the search for emancipation: "egalitarian taxation and transfer policies that reduce inequality might further egalitarian ideals of justice, but they do not themselves shift the economic structure towards a hybrid within which social power has greater weight." So perhaps the framework provided by liberal rights and guarantees, though certainly relevant, is less than ideal for thinking about constructing the terms by which the wide range of associational expressions that community feelings of different sorts give rise to may wield social power over the economy. As he explores various real-world examples of social economics, social capitalism, and cooperative

market economics, a different set of brakes and controls seemed clear to me...but they are ones which Wright himself never discusses explicitly, perhaps because they are distasteful to him, or because he finds them too banal, or perhaps because his sociological approach leaves him without a terminology to fully appreciate them. They are, very simply, disciplines over community expressions and civil associations which the local culture exercises--or at least potentially sometimes can exercise, if the radical democratic egalitarian project is not so committed to cosmopolitanism as to dismiss them out of hand.

The degree to which socially empowering economic and political reforms need to be, or at least should be, entwined with cosmopolitan aims is one of several questions implicitly raised (<http://inmedias.blogspot.com/2010/03/if-capitalism-has-gone-global-can.html>) by Cohen's last book *Why Not Socialism?* This is sometimes a hard matter for folks on the left--influenced by both Marx's universalizable class analysis of capitalism and by the political alignments which have brought projects of anti-colonialism and ethnic and sexual liberation over to mostly the same side in these struggles as the egalitarians--to take seriously. Surely a radical democratic egalitarianism should not be subject to, or even be expected to articulate itself through the context of, a specific local set of communal or cultural or historical or religious feelings, should it? Yet, if we truly are to take "the social in 'socialism' seriously", as Wright puts it, and if we are *not* going to, at the same time, necessarily conceive of that social power as tied to a single common measure of communitarian expression--as Cohen put it, "that I treat everyone with whom I have any exchange or other form of contact as someone toward whom I have the reciprocating attitude that is characteristic of friendship"--but rather will make use of the power of sociality in all the variable associational and embedded forms that it will inevitably take, then perhaps liberal and cosmopolitan (that is, universal) conditions and expectations would, at least sometimes, run counter to the sources of this social power which Wright sees the potential of harnessing.

Of the several "real utopias" that Wright lays out for his readers' consideration as evidence of different ways of following the socialist compass further in the direction of democratic and egalitarian emancipation, only one, I think, fits in the stereotypical liberal/cosmopolitan model: Wikipedia. In Wright's view, Wikipedia--with its "non-market relations, egalitarian participation, deliberative interactions among contributors, democratic governance and adjudication"--is "thoroughly anti-capitalist" in how it is organized and operates. Every other example he gives, however, is far distant from the decidedly non-embedded, participatory but individualistic realm of exchange of Wikipedia; in every other socialist case he presents--whether discussing the participatory budgeting process in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil, the social organization of the childcare and eldercare economy as well as investment capital in Quebec, or the worker-owned cooperative firms of Mondragón in the Basque region of Spain--Wright is addressing forms of associational power which both emerge from and contribute to a specifically and culturally embedded form of community feeling. Sometimes Wright acknowledges this is a positive way (he notes that Quebec has a "highly favorable social environment" for associational economies to take root, due to the province's extensive history of "social movements, cooperatives, and civic associations" by which the province has worked to maintain the "strong sense of solidarity" which goes along with being a minority linguistic community), sometimes more as an obstacle (he also notes that the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation, in expanding beyond the Basque territory and purchasing firms elsewhere in Spain and around the world, faces

a "global melding of capitalist and cooperativist principles," a melding complicated by the fear many in MCC have about the "dilution of solidarity [which could result] from the inclusion of so many worker-members from outside the region"). Either way though, the feeling is there.

Why do I suggest these local and cultural attachments (along with at least some legitimate liberal restrictions) as important candidates for ways of conceiving the directing and promoting of social power of an economy in democratic and egalitarian directions? Because they present a set of conceptual boundaries that, should one avoid the unnecessary violation of them, function as potentially protected spaces, relatively secure from the sort of disruptive projects (whether generated by the invasive state or by capitalism) that can generate resentments and alienation, which are obvious enemies to legitimate democratic and egalitarian emancipations. True, there is no obvious reason to assume that a feeling of popular economic or cultural security will make any given society more amenable to an immanent critique that pushes it in the direction of more radical democratic egalitarianism. But so long as one wishes to enlist the social world and its diverse resources into the construction of alternatives to capitalism, then one must at least acknowledge that a lack of respect for and recognition of those attachments and spaces may result in levels of resentment and alienation which would make such emancipatory critiques that much more politically difficult to pull off.

At this point, one could perhaps challenge Wright from a revolutionary direction, and insist that such resentments are part and parcel of any good strategy of "heightening the contradictions," which by separating the working class from their local and cultural attachments turns them into more effective agents of disruptive change. Wright dismisses this argument, at least as a stand-alone claim: he concludes that "large-scale ruptural strategies for constructing a democratic egalitarian socialism...seem implausible in the world in which we currently live," and suggests that other strategies should be pursued instead. One of those strategies is "symbiotic," which is Wright's way of talking about "class compromises," and the social democratic realization that "[f]orms of social empowerment are likely to be much more durable and to become more deeply institutionalized, and thus harder to reverse, when, in one way or another, they also serve some important interests of dominant groups, and solve real problems faced by the system as a whole." Another strategy, the one which I find much more fruitful given the attention Wright pays to the variable manifestations and historical developments of social power, is that of "interstitial" actions, which "by-pass the state" and seek to manifest their power via sites of activity "that are not directly governed or controlled by the dominant power relations and principles of social organization".

The history of socialist thought, or at least Marxist socialist thought, has generally not been kind to strategies such as these. While Marx himself varied in his opinions about unions and worker co-ops and other such "local" interventions against the power of capital and the state, originating from outside of both, his attitude towards the fully anarchist movement to focus on complete alternative forms of social life was never friendly. Wright, for his part, is clearly not discounting the importance of democratic statist economic regulation and participatory socialism. But his title alone, to say nothing of his arguments, makes it clear that he wants us to consider the more "utopian" options as well. And on my reading of his accounts of social empowerment, this means wrestling with the problem of associational forms which may "interstitially" bring to bear on the economy a communitarian power that is not, in fact, necessarily always egalitarian and

democratic in every way. It also means respecting that the best possible way of continually addressing and re-addressing that particular problem may be found within the local and cultural context by which the emancipatory solidarity potentially emerges in the first place.

Consider the case of Mondragón again. By most measures, these worker cooperatives, and the effects they have had on the distribution of social and economic power throughout their home region in Spain, represent among the most successful examples of a cooperative market economy anywhere in the world. Yet there is more than a little criticism of MCC from the left (<http://links.org.au/node/1933>). Part of it is the legacy of a doctrinaire Marxism which rejects the idea that worker cooperatives can ultimately contribute a socialization of power relations within a country; part of it simple cultural and historical suspicions (Mondragón's founder was a Catholic priest who eschewed any talk of "class struggle" and was at one point honored by General Franco); part of it derives from specific, arguably anti-democratic actions which MCC itself has taken. Wright's own analysis of these latter actions suggest they have their roots in the tensions and expectations which have come to the corporation as the successes of its worker-owned firms and egalitarian pay distribution have obliged it--or tempted it--to expand beyond those conceptual (meaning, local and cultural) boundaries within which the participatory ethos of its founder was first promulgated and embraced:

*Since the mid 1990s, the MCC has adopted an aggressive strategy of expansion beyond its historical home in the Basque country. This has, above all, taken the form of buying up capitalist firms and turning them into subsidiaries of the cooperatives within the corporation....[For example] Fagor Elian, a cooperative that manufactures various kinds of auto-parts, created a new wholly owned subsidiary in Brazil, to manufacture parts for the Brazilian arm of Volkswagen. The director of the MCC explained...that although the Fagor Brazilian plant loses money, the Volkswagen Corporation insisted the Fagor Elian provide parts to its Brazilian operation if it wanted to continue to supply parts to Volkswagen in the EU....[Hence, the] MCC believes that, given market pressures linked to globalization, this strategy of national and global expansion is necessary for the survival of the Mondragón cooperatives in the twenty-first century. Whether or not this diagnosis is correct is a matter of considerable controversy, but in any case the result of this expansion has been to intensify the capitalist dimension of the Mondragón economic hybrid.*

There are, to be sure, many ways in which we might contemplate and develop responses to the pressure which exist in the global marketplace--and some undoubtedly, ought to involve more comprehensive, or "cosmopolitan," parameters. But there remains the fact that a reliance upon those parameters moves one away from the diverse forms of real solidarity and social power which the hope for radical egalitarian and democratic transformation in part depends upon. So why would it not be equally viable--why would it be any less "utopian"--to approach the compass of socialist empowerment and look for ways to preserve the local and cultural environments that provide spaces for emancipation in the first place? The struggles of Mondragón mainly have to do with maintaining a reliable cooperative ethos while simultaneously handling an enormous increase in workers pressing for membership. Perhaps that could be achieved through developing procedures for encouraging "spin-off" cooperatives to be formed, or abandoning the "unitary organizational form" which have guided the cooperatives from the beginning, and accepting that the push for democratic and egalitarian reforms will have

to come through unionization in the subsidiaries, rather than full participatory membership. Would any of these struggles have arrived in a global marketplace more resistant to globalization, and where national economies--and the firms that operated within them--enjoyed greater self-sufficiency (which, yes, would also mean the national markets they supplied would also "enjoy" greater restrictions on the range of pricing and goods available)? Perhaps they would have anyway--but then again, in a global economic environment less hostage to the neoliberal terms of the IMF and the EU, perhaps the Mondragón cooperatives would have developed as an even stronger example of the socialist ethos, one less implicated in the tensions that could pull an association away from radical democratic egalitarianism, because the sources of that tension would be, in a sense, literally "foreign" to the local, cultural, "interstitial" site wherein this particular association was able to plant its socialist seed.

Wright's masterful book plants numerous seeds all its own, most of which give rise to ideas that, on my reading, support each other in development towards both known and as-yet speculative radical democratic and egalitarian futures. I suspect one of those futures will need to make a space for local instantiations of socialism, and that defending and promoting such will require those on the left to make peace with more than just liberals, whom have long been their allies in many respects anyway. There will also need to be some peace, at least some of the time, between different types of culturally communitarian movements and institutions, because those locally embedded expressions of social power cannot help but be a significant component of any proposal to involve the wide range of civil associations and groups in countering the power of corporations and the state. One of the most obvious of these in the United States is the "faith-based initiatives" begun by President Bush, and frequently derided by those on the left, as exclusionary, illiberal and borderline theocratic. Wright himself is not so critical of them, simply noting that church-state partnerships to provide social services to the poor have "at best an ambiguous relation to the emancipatory project of social empowerment; I think his cautiousness in judging them is correct, given that the faith-based experiment, far from being a necessarily sectarian project, in fact reflects a long argument in social democratic circles, and draws upon egalitarian and subsidiarian principles from two centuries worth of European history. Whether that particular seed will grow in the direction of true socialist emancipation is probably doubtful, given the realities of American party politics; but whether it, or other locally and culturally grounded sources of community action and power like it, can be part of orientation towards true socialist emancipation, is far less doubtful, I think.

Wright's book teaches us that the movement towards radical democratic and egalitarian ends will, and should, involve multiple hybrid forms, moving on many distinct fronts--some confrontational, some "liberal" and symbiotic, and some, quite importantly, being local, cultural, and interstitial--indeed, it may often be the case that the latter will require action on the part of the former in order to long survive. Burke would, I think, find next to nothing in Wright's argument persuasive, but it may be that a better appreciation of how we can work to turn the socialist compass will require a deeper intellectual investment in, and maybe even a deeper love for, our little utopian platoons. If Wright's book has made that point well--if it helps convince those on the left that the communitarian component of social empowerment, when properly recognized and tended, needn't be either something singular and forced, or something which necessarily undermines egalitarianism from within--then his book has done something important indeed.