

Mainstreaming utopia

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Eric Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* is a courageous book which assembles an impressive amount of knowledge about our society and its possible evolution. It is an important milestone, perhaps a form of accomplishment, of the Real Utopias project initiated by Wright many years ago. For a single author, even a tremendously erudite and experienced one, this is a remarkable achievement. Moreover, the main message of the book is convincing. We can and we need to think about alternative societies, or at least alternative institutions and social arrangements.

Why is it important to emulate EW's effort? The beginning of the 21st century looks quite disenchanted compared to the beginning of the previous century. The communist ideal which was lively, then, has now become a nightmarish chimera, and anxiety about possible catastrophic climate consequences of human hubris has replaced the faith in unbounded technical and economic progress. In this context, shedding all interest in social transformation is a tempting but not fitting attitude –it is, rather, a shameful lack of responsibility and solidarity. Whatever happens to material progress, there remains hope to reduce human suffering through social progress.

The main point of this discussion is that, however laudable EW's efforts are, and partly thanks to them, time may be ripe for changing the scale and scope of this sort of enterprise. Envisioning real utopias should become a collective, coordinated effort, for reasons to be explained below.

There are many details of the book which could be commented upon and praised or criticized, but this short text will focus on three questions which appear central in the Real Utopias project.

Why focus on capitalism versus socialism?

The book is oscillating between two different projects. The first project is to identify the main flaws of current social systems and to seek remedies for each of them. This is the project that seems the most important, needed, urgent, for our time. But another lurking project in the book is to revive socialism and to win the war against capitalism, after so many lost battles. The risk is that the latter project may stand in the way of the former.

Focusing on capitalism versus socialism may be counterproductive if it polarizes the audience of the real utopias project. While we are in great need of new ideas, it may put off many good-willed people to see that this is all about saving old ideas from a historical failure. This is perhaps mostly a communication or marketing problem. Another potential problem, probably more serious, is that many hardships of our time are not closely linked to capitalism as such but to more general features of market economies or unequal societies. Trying to harness the whole effort toward social progress

¹ This is a group of seminar students who have participated in the critical analysis of E. Wright's book in the 2012-2013 spring term in Princeton.

on an anti-capitalist campaign may prevent rigorous analysis of the causes of the flaws that are to be eliminated. Similarly, thinking of future solutions in terms of socialism may thwart imagination and make it harder to innovate, such as, for instance, designing new forms of solidarity within the frame of a market economy.

A regrettable consequence of focusing on capitalism is that it requires a definition of capitalism, and then, also requires arguing that the problems that call for social transformation are attributable to capitalism rather than other aspects of social institutions. One could probably take issue with EW's definition of capitalism in terms of, first, a social structure combining private ownership of the means of production and propertyless workers and, second, coordination of economic activities by markets. As explained below, one could imagine a non-capitalist society that contains all these ingredients. But even if this definition were roughly correct or convenient, it would still create the awkward situation that all the main social problems of the moment must be attributed to capitalism, which may sound unlikely for some of them (consumerism is an example). The alternative strategy would be to leave out of the transformative project the hardships that are not linked to capitalism as such, but this would make the project less comprehensive and therefore less attractive.

This criticism should not be taken too literally because that would be unfair to the book. The list of potential innovations that are presented in the book is very long and diverse, and does not give the impression that the author's imagination and openness to solutions are blinkered. This observation is not just about piecemeal institutional ideas such as town councils and internet shareware. As far as general alternative social systems are concerned, no less than seven options are described, which range from state socialism to the most decentralized form of non-market society, with various forms of market economies in between. Moreover, the author carefully starts by delineating general principles of social justice that should be appealing to most progressive thinkers nowadays. The long list of problems with capitalism unraveled in chapter 3 of the book can be read as the pressing social problems of the moment without worrying too much about whether they are really about capitalism or not.

It seems also quite plausible to argue that a real progress can only be made by changing the social structure in such a profound way that the outcome of the transformation could no longer be called capitalist. One can even argue that the key problems of inequalities in our social stratification have to do with capitalist labor relations and the role of wealth in the economy. I believe that the capitalist society is preserving outdated forms of unequal labor relations which should be eliminated and can only be eliminated by an overhaul of workplace organization. Decision-making power is captured in firms by oligarchies which create large inefficiencies via lack of trust, holdup problems, conflicts, and excessive risk-taking. The recent financial crisis is in part attributed to a governance problem in organizations, and it has been very interesting to witness how diligently this elite, although consensually deemed responsible for mismanagement, has fought to preserve its interests and prerogatives.

It must also be said that the author is very critical about the Marxist vulgate, which is very well analyzed in Chapter 4. In fact, one can criticize this chapter for being too negative about the Marxian approach. Although the main scenarios imagined by Marx about the evolution of the capitalist society (decrease in the profit rate, impoverishment of the proletariat) were misconceived, and although EW convincingly defends a non-deterministic approach of history that seeks "structural

possibilities” of alternative institutions, it may be too hasty to reject Marx’s idea that basic economic imperatives may be a strong driving force of social evolutions. Preserving authoritarian, quasi-feudal labor relations may be relatively easy and even efficient in a Taylorist context with a strong division of labor, but may become a hindrance when skilled labor is predominant, so that autonomy and initiative become key factors of productivity. When the inefficiency of domination in the firm will be fully exposed, it will become harder and harder for the elite to maintain it. Economic necessity, rather than humanitarian considerations or social justice ideals, might still turn out to be a potent engine of social change for our times.

In summary, it would be advisable to take the capitalist institutions of the current societies not as the sole concern, but as one source of harms among many others; similarly, socialism could be just one tradition among others that may be referred to as a source of inspiration. The project of imagining and implementing new, realistic, utopias should go much beyond the capitalism/socialism divide, even if the central aspects of the social structure have to do with it. Chapter 5 of the book should be entitled “The progressive compass” rather than “The socialist compass”.

What role for market transactions?

In chapter 5 (“The socialist compass”), an interesting analytical framework is proposed for the analysis of alternative societies. The center of the frame is “The Economy”, and it is surrounded by three sources of power that may control it and influence one another: Social Power (civil society), Economic Power, and State Power. Economic power operates through material incentives (“bribing”, in a very general, not necessarily corrupting, sense); state power operates through constraint and regulation; social power is supposed to involve voice and persuasion, the free association of people, and seems to be conceived as a quite soft form of power. The main perspective for social transformation, as depicted by EW, is the increase in social power by giving it greater sway over state power (deepening democracy) or economic power.

This framework provides a nice way of describing various types of societies. When social power controls the state which controls the economy, one has a model of (democratic!) statist socialism. When social power controls the state which influences economic power which controls the economy, one has a form of social democracy. When social power controls economic power which controls the economy, one has some form of cooperative economy. And when social power directly controls the economy, possibly jointly with state power and/or economic power, one has an important sector of non-market, volunteering form of economic activity. When social power is the only significant control of economic activities, one seems to obtain something akin to communism as envisioned by Marx.

What I find problematic about this approach is that it ties most of the aim of social transformation to the project of developing non-market economic arrangements, through the expansion of social power, the empowerment of civil society. Given our current knowledge about how economic coordination can work with and without markets, it seems important that a *real* utopias project should seek to tame and use markets, with their great potential and well-understood failures, rather than bypass them. While there is a lot to be said for the confinement of the market competitive ethos to a circumscribed sphere, it seems unpromising to devise alternative societies on the main basis of a combination of state planning and an NGO-like form of free association and gift system.

This is perhaps where the focus on overthrowing capitalism plays an undesirable role, when the market as a form of economic coordination is taken to be one of the two central tenets of capitalism.

If overthrowing capitalism was not the main aim of the project, it would become possible to consider keeping some aspects of capitalist institutions in a better society. Moreover, if it were acknowledged that a capitalist economy is just a special form of a market economy, it would become possible to talk about a post-capitalist economy that would still be, primarily, a market economy.

The distinction between market coordination and capitalism is probably essential for the invention of “real” utopias. The economy has been relying substantially on markets since the Roman Empire at least, and even if the current spread of markets is unprecedented in history, one cannot brand the market as a specific institution of the capitalist society. Nor is the capitalist economy the reign of the free market. Markets have always been restricted in some way, and they still are today, to a great extent. One cannot even talk about a continuous expansion of the market, since very important markets of the past are now banned in most countries (the markets for slaves, for child labor are prominent examples, the markets for votes or wives have been less important economically but are now also rejected). If there is a historical trend, it is a complex movement that expands the opportunities for certain transactions but simultaneously reduces others, especially those that are deemed contrary to a growing sphere of “human rights”.

It is well explained in the book that private property is compatible with a variety of restrictions on the use and transfer of property, and that current regulations do contain many restrictions already. It would not be very difficult to extend the current prevailing ban on markets for political votes into a ban on undemocratic firms. The labor market could retain many of its current features, but if it were impossible for a worker to sell his or her right to participation in the democratic decision-making bodies of his firm, and impossible for an employer to buy it, one would have a substantial change in labor and social relations without abandoning private ownership or economic coordination by markets. One would also need to find financial regulations and institutions guaranteeing that democratic firms are not deprived of funding, short-sighted, or excessively risk-averse. But it is quite unlikely that, along these lines, a widespread empowerment of workers (and other stakeholders) in the workplace would require any more state planning or any less markets (except certain forms of equity markets, probably) than we currently have.²

It is of course very hard to implement a transition from the current equilibrium in which most workers relinquish their autonomy (and, often, a good deal of their dignity) when they take a job, to a new equilibrium in which it would be prohibited, and considered shameful, to spend all one’s working hours in a subordinate position. In a slack labor market, employers have no pressure to offer democratic arrangements, and the current situation in which the economic oligarchy captures an excessive share of an inefficiently low productive surplus (the inefficiency being the product of the labor relations they impose), and in which apathetic workers do not fight for greater autonomy, can persist almost indefinitely. As suggested above, worker empowerment does eventually prevail when classical relations are so blatantly inefficient that even employers find it in their interest to share control (as in professional services and high tech firms). A cultural shift in favor of a democratic ethos in most organizations is slowly taking place.

² This is discussed in greater detail in M. Fleurbaey 1993, “An egalitarian democratic private ownership economy”, *Politics and Society* 21: 215-233. One member of our seminar objects to such models “that simultaneously entrench many aspects of capitalism and erect greater obstacles for more desirable alternatives to capitalism.”

But, all in all, none of this has to do with abandoning decentralized economic transactions. The freedom of workers and firms to enter into contracts need not be limited much more than with current regulations that forbid dangerous and unhealthy jobs or bonded labor. Banning the market for power in democratic firms is indeed a restriction on the scope of markets, a de-commodification of personal autonomy and dignity, but is not at all like replacing the labor market by another form of worker placement. An egalitarian and democratic economy can still have a lot of private ownership, including of the means of production (household savings can still be the source of investment funding, so that households are still the ultimate owners of the means of production), and many markets and decentralized transactions, including a labor market for dignified positions in democratic firms (the American university system might be thought of as a model for such a labor market). So, it would keep the main features of EW's definition of capitalism. But it could hardly be called "capitalist" because the power of wealth would be shared with labor, and in the workplace labor could even have the lion's share of decision power.

To be fair, such an alternative model, although ignored in EW's socialist compass, could find its place there as a variety of "social capitalism", because of its strong reliance on markets as coordination devices and the persistence of private ownership. But the fact that such a possibility is not listed among the main models (social capitalism is described in the book only as involving cooperatives in which workers own the capital of their firm) reveals that eliminating markets, instead of taming them, may have too high a priority in the "socialist" compass.

What is the status of utopian research?

While the need for a revival of interest in social transformation cannot be underestimated, it is not obvious to define the best way to organize the task of conceiving alternative social systems. EW provides a very appealing framework, with the following components: a minimal theory of justice (equal access to the necessary means of human flourishing); an identification of the main injustices and defects in our current social institutions; a general hierarchy of criteria of desirability, viability (i.e., sustainability once in place), achievability (i.e., potential transition); a list of general models of society articulated around how the three powers (social, economic, state) control the economy and check one another; a guide to particular institutions which can contribute to social improvements (analyzed primarily by EW as empowerment of civil society over the state and over the economy); an analysis of the potential transitional trajectories from here to there.

There are many good ideas in this structure. The leading position of the criterion of desirability and of the theory of justice is important in order to protect the normative judgments from being carried by economic feasibility and political expediency considerations. The list of flaws in current institutions may not correspond to features of capitalism, but it is a list of current problems that need to be addressed. The general models of alternative societies are questionable because the key issues may have to do less with the relations between the three powers than with the way each of them is organized and exercised; but something like this model is needed to explore alternative options with the ingredients of various possible societies.

An alternative framework is actually suggested in the book. The idea of empowering individuals, giving them greater control over their lives, and the understanding of democracy as the extension, for collective decisions, of individual freedom, are particularly promising. EW argues that the total degree of autonomy in society is not fixed, and that it can be increased by more effective decision

procedures and more democratic power sharing. While this may seem counterintuitive because relative power is always a zero-sum game, it is an important observation that increasing people's control over their lives is actually increasing the total "amount" of autonomy in a given society.

This can perhaps be summarized in the principle that individuals should have a say in all decisions that affect their lives, in proportion to the impact of such decisions over their own interests. For private decisions, this requires personal freedom. For decisions with externalities, and more generally decisions which affect a collectivity of people, the affected group should be the main decision-maker, and from the individual level to the world level this general idea provides a usual guide for the evaluation of political but also economic institutions, at the bar of individual autonomy. Instead of separating social, economic, and state power, one should probably place the individual and, from bottom up, all groups affected by decisions, at the center of the analysis, and evaluate institutions by how they allocate decision power over various decisions. The problem about economic power, then, is not to place it under the authority of state power or social power, but rather to make economic decisions depend on the will of the relevant stakeholders. Markets may remain a valuable device, according to this autonomy approach, because they preserve the degree of decentralization that seems required by the principle that two economic agents should be free to make a transaction if the main impact is on their own interests (provided that the transaction does not alienate their freedom and dignity). Democratic firms appear desirable because they include more of the relevant stakeholders in key decisions about strategy, internal organization, working conditions, and so on. Government regulation of externalities and market failures is important and, given the wide impact of such decisions, requires democratic control by the general population. International organizations are needed for decisions which cannot be properly managed at the national level, but they also require a form of democratic control which is often lacking in current institutions.

This is but an example of the interesting ideas that are contained, or that are germinating, in EW's book. The main point to be made here is that the scope of such analysis, the variety of disciplines and competences that it requires, seems overwhelming for a single author. There is a great need for the development of a serious work in social prospective analysis. EW's book shows the way, but also the limitations of a single-author enterprise. The Real Utopias project is a broader enterprise, and one could think of expanding the scale of the enterprise further. The climate challenge has induced the creation of an international group of experts which write reports summarizing the state of knowledge about the trends and risks in climate change, as well as the possible precautions and remedies that can be implemented in response. What is impressive about this international group is that it assembles a mass of competences and knowledge that is far beyond what a single university, let alone a single research team, would be able to achieve. What is less attractive about it is that its proceedings are under the control of the governments of the countries involved in the United Nations Convention on Climate Change.

For social transformation, which covers a very wide array of competences in social sciences and beyond (environmental sustainability becoming a key issue for social innovation, therefore requiring the expertise of natural sciences), a serious analysis of the possibilities and the obstacles would similarly require assembling a large network of experts. An International Panel on Social Change, with perhaps a lighter structure than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and certainly more independence from governmental influence, would seem necessary to carry out the

assessment of potential improvements to social institutions in a competent way. Such assessment could be made on a regular basis (every decade?). Just as different working groups in the IPCC focus on different topics, one could imagine that the working groups of the “IPSC” would focus on various issues similar to those addressed in the various chapters of EW’s book, such as: the pending problems and sources of human suffering; the relevant theories of justice and the possible evaluation criteria; the basic economic institutions (markets, organizations, finance, government policy); the political institutions; and so on. The Panel could conceive of its task not as the design of a particular political platform, but as contributing to summarizing the prevailing normative views and the state of the art in the disciplines that are relevant to assessing the possibilities for transformation.

This might be the main difference with EW’s socialist agenda. The IPSC’s agenda would not be socialist and could feed the prospective thought of various strands of utopianism. There will always be divergent ideas about the best direction that society should take, but there is also room for consensus about certain injustices and about the feasibility or viability of various institutional combinations. The IPSC could identify the areas in which a consensus prevails and the points which raise disagreement. Its mission would be primarily to recapitulate the state of knowledge in the field of social change. Its existence would likely encourage research in domains which are neglected nowadays, especially the examination of alternative institutions. While current research is abundant on inequalities and social problems, and is also reasonably abundant on understanding how the economy and the society work, it is, understandably, quite shy about the viability of various alternative institutions in the economic and political spheres. The IPSC would give greater respectability to such research.

In conclusion, the final question to Erik Wright might be: What about transforming the Real Utopias project into an IPSC?

Postscript: Is an IPSC realistic and desirable?

Whether an IPSC can attract expertise without much funding should not be a problem. There are many online networks which collect and disseminate expertise, relying mostly on the goodwill of the contributors and, perhaps, the recognition that is attached to being invited to contribute.

Whether an IPSC is superfluous given the already existing political movements and networks of activism is easy to rebut. The point of the IPSC is not to provide another sounding board for convinced utopians. It is to provide academic expertise on the state of knowledge in moral and political philosophy, sociology, economics, political theory, psychology, and so on, about the issues of desirable and possible social transformations. Imagine *Envisioning Real Utopias* written by 200 specialists providing the best expertise of the time.

Whether an IPSC may be rejected by social activists for its intellectual elitism must be considered. Knowledge about social change is not like physics or climatology, and there is a lot of grassroots knowledge. While restricting authorship to recognized experts seems important to preserve the scientific authority of the output, there should be an open forum for the collection of comments. The internet makes it easy and almost costless – but someone must read the comments and extract the relevant material. Transparency in the selection of authors would also be important.

Whether an IPSC can be infiltrated, or pressured, by lobbies, governments, or extremists is a serious issue and the best (but imperfect) guarantee against this threat is to make clear that its project is not to build the platform of a particular party, but to synthesize academic knowledge. Restricting authorship to academic experts is important for this purpose, too. Ideally, an IPSC should be useful to utopians of very different creeds.