

**INTERROGATIONS, SESSION 3, OCTOBER 19**  
**ENVISIONING REAL UTOPIAS SEMINAR**

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**Abigail Andrews**

One thing I would like to interrogate is the tripartite division of state-civil society-economy, which is obviously very commonly used, but which you also actively adopt. As you point out, the economy in particular is a sphere that is pretty difficult to delineate: do we include activities such as rearing one's own children, for instance, in the category of the economy? According to some (Polanyi and others) the "separation" of the economy and the economic from the social has itself been a conceptual tool and a particular feature of capitalism. How would you respond to these claims, and how do you see this tripartite division appearing differently in an idealized socialist vision? Indeed, you define socialism as a system run by "social power." What does that imply for the differentiation of the economic sphere? You seem to maintain the differentiation in your diagrams but perhaps imply that it might become less relevant to conceptually divide "the economy" from "civil society" as social power increased.

Another theme that repeatedly arose for me in these two chapters, related to a portion of my previous post, was the question of the relationship between ideal typical concepts and empirical practices. To this end, I found your argument that Marx saw his thesis on communism "as a regulative ideal, as a moral vision to guide our actions rather than an actual claim about a future trajectory of social change" (7) fascinating. You also raise the point that we cannot think of our path to socialism as a trajectory but rather should look for a theory of possibilities that signals to us whether we are progressing towards or away from that ideal. Does this mean that your utopian vision cannot be attainable in full but is rather a means of motivating people and guiding steps "in the right direction"? You mention that economic systems always exist in hybridity. Therefore, the economic systems we refer to never exist in the ways we define them, including socialism. How do we come to terms with the fact that ultimately our final vision is unrealizable? Can this concept of unreachability raise the same suspicion of vain utopianism that past ideas of and efforts at communism have and risk the same disillusionment? How do we use an ideal type to guide us and help us analyze the world without getting subsumed and then disappointed by it?

Finally, I wanted to ask about the idea of civil society. From the way you describe it, it sounds like voluntary associations just pop out of the ground and people are eager to participate. Furthermore, you make it sound like collective goals a) exist and b) are easily agreed upon. What about when people do not feel they have or recognize a set of collective goals? What about when they resist participating in voluntary organizations? What if they see the benefits to be gained from such associationalism but don't want to take on the costs of participating (time, money, etc)? Also, I am curious whether others have thought your notion of civil society is culturally specific?

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## Jennifer Seminatore

Wright discusses how increasing fragmentation of the working class constitutes a problem for Marx's theory of the transition to socialism through capitalism. With increasingly complex class structures and heterogeneity of work, a coherent, self-conscious working-class seems further off than ever. This critique raised another, related dilemma for me. Given that class structures are complicated and working people's lives highly divergent in contemporary capitalism, there is a tendency not only to *not* recognize a common plight, but to in fact lay the blame for problems on other groups of (working or poor or etc.) people rather than either capitalists or, more importantly, capitalism. For example, immigrants and people on welfare are pointed to for explanations of the ineffectiveness of social spending to improve citizen's lives. This type of blaming is related to but different from the individual effort explanation of success in that people realize that they do work hard but do not achieve the success they envisioned, and therefore look for other explanations. How are we to convince people that there are structural explanations for inequality? I believe this is a central task to the development of a significant mass movement aimed towards altering the system of control over the economy, both because not blaming is a prerequisite to solidarity and collective action and because the belief in these structures is necessary to desire to transform them.

Also, Wright argues (and I think persuasively) that because Marx's argument about the necessary collapse/overthrow of capitalism are insufficient, that it is best to move from attempting to elucidate the causal mechanisms of capitalism to understand its necessary demise to attempting to elaborate institutional possibilities for transformation. Related to my first question, I think that a major institutional block is convincing people that structural inequality exists, and I want to know what sorts of possibilities are around for the transformation of the tendency to invoke either individual effort explanations or scapegoating.

Wright discusses the difficulties in revolutionary socialism for creating democratic (*social*) institutions. That is, democratic experimentalism has failed to emerge "after the revolution" both because of the organizational structures necessary for the perpetration of revolution and because, historically, revolutionary governments have faced extreme pressures from without. The second point I think points towards the likely necessarily *global* character of transformations (resistance to the status quo of power relations in one arena can be challenged both from within and from without in a global society of nation-states). To what extent, because of this point as well as because of global competition and outsourcing, must the transition from capitalism be global? What would the geography of the transition look like? Where would social action be located? Would a global egalitarian order pose qualitatively different problems for an egalitarian order, or simply more of the same sort?

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**Kate Maich**

I am interested in the second part of the intensification of anticapitalist class struggle thesis that EOW explicates, particularly with regard to working class organizations (11). Within the discussion of challenges to capitalism, I'm interested this equation of the labor movement with a 'class compromise', an 'abandonment of any attempt at revolutionary organization and mobilization.' While I completely agree that this is the [lack of our] welfare state's function, I'm not so sure I can fully agree with this assessment of organized labor.

First, 'working class organizations' is quite broad—does this characterization of WCOs also apply to groups like the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor Peoples' Economic Human Rights Campaign, or other low-income or non-working peoples' organizations? How are we defining or conceptualizing what 'really challenges' capitalist power here? What does it look like? Does only a complete overthrow of capitalism, with workers owning and sharing the economy together, count? Or could these WCOs present enough challenges to capitalism that the system could actually be destabilized and changed?

Undemocratic sidebars that bargain for disenchanted workers to have a slightly larger 'piece of the pie' [I'm thinking of Castells today and his characterization of Chilean labor unions] are obviously indicative of a bureaucratized labor system that thrives upon capitalism and perpetuates it, keeping its workers just happy enough to keep producing, keep working, keep teaching, etc...since what other choice do they have? Yes, labor is institutionalized and given to 'struggle' over bits and pieces of capitalist profit, labor law is historically and consistently written in favor of corporate interests and NLRB decisions continue to work this way [and your point about the heterogeneity of interests among employees is a really important one here, I think], the mentality that women workers, workers of color, and immigrant workers are 'unorganizable' still persists, 'labor' as a movement is fragmented and many locals still operate out of the servicing model...

Yet is it so straightforward as to think that working class organizations [including progressive and democratic unions as well as workers' centers and other worker-led coalitions, etc] are making 'real gains' in peoples' lives, but that's all? Can only mild, incremental change come about this way within the context of capitalism, or is there potential for something more? I think of Dan Clawson's work here on the history of unionism and the way that what he calls 'upsurges' happen not slowly and over time but in fact occur quickly and suddenly. He argues that unions' merging with social movements around race, class, gender, and nation are what will be the 'next upsurge,' working toward cross-border alliances and solidarity beyond the workplace.

So, I guess I'd like to further probe this idea of how we can really 'develop a collective capacity to *really* challenge capitalist power'...or will these efforts just be continually thwarted 'within a society in which capitalism remains the dominant form of social organization of economic power?' (19)

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## Jorge Sola

As Erik himself recognizes, the limits between the three different domains are not always clear. That is likely not possible to solve this problem in the abstract discussion. Nevertheless, it will raise some problems in the more concrete analysis, like it happens in the political parties' case or with regard to the democratic working of many civil associations. Let me focus in two related issues.

1- I really appreciate the effort to move over the old socialist position, which lies in a strong confidence in the State. We have good reasons to think that there are intrinsic mechanisms of Modern State which block its democratization, like the huge concentration of power in few hands. Therefore, it is politically stimulating thinking about the empowerment of civil society. But it seems to me that in the Erik's argument "social power" amounts to "democratic power", while I think that is wrong. In the conclusion (p. 17) it is more clarified, when he notes that we would need a State which create rules of the game and mechanisms of coordination in civil society. In the same page, he deals with the problem of associations like KKK or NAACP.

However, I am thinking of other less clear examples of non-democratic social power. For instance, are the tripartite neo-corporatist arrangements (p. 14) really democratic? I think that, under capitalist conditions, they have good consequences and they are better than nothing. But in many aspects neo-Corporativism is not democratic. Why? One, it violates the rule "one person, one vote"; two, it makes the accountability of leading actors (business associations and labor unions) really difficult; and three, the deliberative process is rather an equilibrium of particularistic interest based on actors' power.

2- Erik also recognizes that this sharp division between the three domains is historically specific. In other epochs the limits of each domain and the relations between them (even the very domains) were different. Let me make an example of one of these epochs, those where the idea of democracy was born: the Ancient Athens. Many scholars point out that it is an anachronism to talk about "the State" in this society, because the political institutions were not a machine separate from society like it is the Modern State. These political institutions were much more embedded in the political community.

Since the Erik's explanation of the democratic nature of "social power" or "civil society" seems to me a bit unsatisfactory, the Greek example drives me to wondering that perhaps the socialist goal should be blurring the separation between the State and the civil society rather (or besides) than just to empower the latter. Thus, the final goal will not be just to subordinate State to civil society, but to eliminate the State like something different to the social power. There would be political institutions, but not a State like we know now. (Anyway, I am not very confidence of this formulation; perhaps it is just another way to say the same.)

3- Finally, I would like to point out something about the concept of power, but related with your exposition rather than with the very content. "Power" is a contested concept

and a polysemous word. I think one of the most confusing things is that we use this word in the everyday life language in two different, but related meanings: power *to* and power *over*. Therefore, I think this distinction could be the prior step to define clearly power, which is what Michael Mann does when he talks about *collective* and *distributive* power. It doesn't matter if one uses the concept of power only in the first meaning (as Erik Wright) or in the second one (as Steven Lukes). This distinction is very important because both "types" of power are very related –as Erik says himself– and we run the risk of confuse them or to think that one necessarily *implies* the other one. In sum up, I agree with the content of your definition and I think it is clear; but perhaps it would be clearer if you posed this distinction at the beginning. In any case, that is just a personal perception as reader. (By the way, could you say the title of Callinicos' book you mention in the footnote?)

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### Ofer Sharone

I wonder to what extent it could be argued that social control of economic production has certain inherent tendencies in the same way that you argued in chapter 2 about the inherent tendencies of capitalism. For example, let's consider the environment. If we imagine a community that democratically controls local economic production it seems likely that there would be an inherent tendency not to pollute the local air. Unlike the case of externalities in capitalism, here the community actually bears the costs of local pollution. So, in this case, even economic rational self interest points to different outcomes from capitalism. But, a tougher case arises with respect to environmental damage like global warming that is not primarily suffered by the local community alone but dispersed globally. Here the costs of the community's actions are mostly externalized. Can we still argue that social power will inherently lean in a direction different from capitalist economic power? If we stick to a rational self interest model then the incentives to not stop global warming appear similar to those of capitalists. The community benefits from economic activity and the whole world suffers from a little more warming. But, perhaps, social power has an inherent tendency not to think in terms of narrow interests and to generate more solidarity with fellow humans and future generations? This may be so because social control, at least in principle, allows bringing to economic decisions a whole host of values beside economic self interest, while capitalism – given its compete or die structure – mandates economic interest to trump other concerns. Still, just the fact that social power can consider and weigh other values does not mean that it necessarily act on them. So, in cases like global warming, it seems to me, the most that can be said, is that unlike capitalism which is structurally prevented from considering this harm, social power opens a space for weighing such harms against possible narrow benefits. Similar analyses could be made regarding issues such as exploitation: unlikely for workers who are members of the social community but possible for workers who come from the outside.

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### Adam Goldstein

Chapter 3 was solidly convincing. I found Chapter 4 to be impressively imaginative and ambitious, but also a bit more difficult to wrap my head around, especially regarding the economy. I think part of my issue here is that you collapse multifaceted, polyglot systems into ideal types, and then redeploy them as quantitative variables. I understand that societies may be more or less “capitalistic,” but *which* elements of capitalism they retain seems to be a larger crux when thinking about whether particular institutions are consistent with socialism. For instance in the “social economy,” socialist firms (i.e. discrete productive units that are collectively owned by workers) may employ markets to allocate resources between them, but my sense is that employing labor through markets would be much more problematic (but of course this is an open question). Especially given the potential role you grant to markets in a socialist alternative, I wonder if it might be helpful to 1) more sharply disaggregate the concepts of productive organization and coordination in your initial discussion of the economic sphere, and 2) clarify the extent to which markets are compatible with social control (i.e. markets between socialized firms versus markets between atomized individuals). Or is this something to be clarified by an empowered democratic civil society (rather than by us)?

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### Teresa Gonzales

In thinking about the role of markets within social economies and social empowerment over economic activity, I am reminded of a) the Argentinean worker's cooperatives that took over abandoned factories and b) the women's cooperative in Oaxaca, MX, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca (M.A.R.O.). In the case of Argentina, factory workers restarted/recovered factories and businesses that were left empty due to the country's recession of the 1990s to early 2000s. These workers have united to push for state recognition (in regards to ownership) and funding in order to continue to operate machinery, buildings, etc. This collective economic strategy allows them to combat poverty, while also placing them in a much different arena than pure capitalist production. The state has transferred some factories over to the workers, allowing them to both control the means of production and the profits. This can be seen as a move to a more social economy, with state recognition. The same can be said for M.A.R.O., where a group of women came together to ensure that craftspeople were not being exploited by third party sellers, and to allow the craftswomen control over all stages of the market. Similar to the Argentinean workers, the women control the means of production, their labor time, and their profits. At the same time, this creates a market for not only “traditional” “homegrown” goods, but also an “authentic” experience for tourists to consume. The women have appropriated a tourist market which stemmed from capitalism and restructured it into a non-hierarchical & egalitarian production. In both of these cases, “social empowerment over ownership, [and the] use and control of economic resources and activities” have created a socialist economy. Yet, both of these economies exist in countries where capitalism hasn't necessarily “worked” as powerfully as in areas

such as the United States. Are socialist economies then only allowable, possible, or imaginable in nation states where there has been either great economic decline due to capitalist strategies or a failure for capitalism to take full control over the market? If this is the case, how can we imagine a move to a social economy within countries where capitalism is successful, i.e. the United States, or western Europe? Can this only occur after an economic rupture or decline? Furthermore, will the “state” only recognize/legitimize the power of social economics when no other opportunity or structure has surfaced to ameliorate the breakdown of a capitalist economy?

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### **heidy sarabia**

In the conclusion of Ch 4., I thought it was interesting the distinction drawn about socialism and anarchism. From that distinction, I am wondering if socialism—which “requires a state” (17)—is a biased solution that will ultimately benefit some communities over others. I guess I am thinking about “necessary” labor, which someone has to perform. It seems to me that in order to maintain the current life style of people living in large urban areas, there is a need for a state/administrative body that ultimately “excuses” some from engaging in “necessary” labor. How can we maintain our current life style without engaging in “necessary” labor?

I guess this issue come up for me because I think of small autonomous communities in Mexico (Chiapas). They do not require a state, only local governing boards. But all the people engage in “necessary” labor. For example, the teachers work in the schools 4 days per week and work in agriculture the remaining 3 days.

Are we thinking about a necessary state because our realities in the U.S. shape our understanding of how “socialism” ought to operate so that we get a utopian society, while at the same time maintain the current life style we have?