

Seminar on “How to be an anti-capitalist for the 21st century”

Prof. Erik Olin Wright

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This seminar will grapple with a really difficult question: Is it possible to have a compelling strategy to transcend capitalism with an emancipatory alternative? Here is the way I describe this problem in chapter 3 of the book on which I am working:

Most social change in human history operates behind the backs of people as the cumulative effect the unintended consequences of human action. To be able to have a “strategy” for social change, in contrast, it must be possible to produce desirable social transformation through deliberate, intentional action. There are undoubtedly desirable goals of social transformation for which no strategy is possible, either because the goal itself is not viable – it just wouldn’t work – or because there is no way to get there from here. It therefore may simply be impossible to have a coherent strategy for the radical transformation of something as complex as a social system. This is what Frederick Hayek claimed in his strident attack on socialism, *The Fatal Conceit*. Intellectuals, he argued, believed in the fantasy that they could imagine an alternative to the existing social system and bring it about through deliberate political action. This was a fantasy because the negative unintended consequences of such massive social engineering inevitably would overwhelm the intended outcomes.

Hayek’s criticism should not be dismissed out of hand simply because he used it in defense of very conservative political positions. What we need is an exploration of alternative anti-capitalist strategies that avoids both the false optimism of wishful thinking and the disabling pessimism that emancipatory social transformation is beyond strategic reach.

Much of the reading for sessions will be draft chapters of the book-in-progress, *How to be an anti-capitalist for the 21st century*. I had hoped to have a complete draft of the book by the time the seminar began, but (alas) much of it remains unwritten. As in many difficult problems, once you begin getting into the fine-grained details of the argument, certain things you thought were settled begin to unravel.

The work of the seminar

For each session, students should prepare a short, written “interrogation” of the reading for that week from *How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century*. [There are additional readings for each session, principally from *Envisioning Real Utopias*, but I want the focus of our discussions to be on the new manuscript]. The purpose of these interrogations is to define an issue *which you want to discuss in class*. This can be a criticism of some argument I make, or a theme you want to explore in some way, or a question about something you don’t fully understand. These should be of the 250-300 word length, not short papers. And, in general, you should focus on a *single issue*; do not lay out a whole agenda of problems. I will not grade these

interrogations, but they are a real requirement. At the session I will select some number of these to be the basis for the discussion.

Interrogations should be emailed to me as an attachment by Tuesday evening at 6pm the day before each Wednesday seminar so that I will have a chance to read them before the seminar. The subject line should contain only this: Interrogation #1 [or #2, #3, #4]

Here are the detailed instructions:

Subject line: Interrogation #1,2,3,4 [the number corresponds to the session]
 Email to: eowright@wisc.edu
 Length: 250-300 words
 Objective: Raise a single issue/question/criticism/theme you want to discuss

Readings

All readings are available on the course page for the seminar:

<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Sydney-seminar.html>

A pdf of *Envisioning Real Utopias* is available at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU.htm>

A note about the manuscript and its audience

My original intention in writing *How to be an Anti-Capitalist for the 21st Century* was to write a short accessible book that would be of interest to both activists and academics. *Envisioning Real Utopias* turned out to be somewhat daunting for many activists even though I had tried very hard to make it readable. This was partially because of its length, partially because of its many footnotes, and partially because of necessity I spent a lot of time in the book addressing various kinds of objections. So, I decided it would be a good idea to write a sequel to *Envisioning* which both reflected additional thinking I have done since it was written and would be more readable for a nonacademic audience. I therefore decided to have no footnotes and virtually no references in the body of the text and, instead, will write a short bibliographic essay as an appendix at the end of the book briefly indicating the sources for the ideas in each chapter. I have also tried to minimize digressions and stick to the main thrust of the narrative. I have found it challenging to stick to these constraints, especially as I have encountered new theoretical problems in chapters 3 and 5. My difficulty here is what sociologists would call the problem of “reference groups”: As I write there are various shadowy figures looking over my shoulder and raising objections, pointing out places where I have side-stepped tricky problems or inadequately pursued an issue, and occasionally shaking their head. I want the material in the book to withstand their scrutiny as well as be accessible to ordinary readers. And that is a real challenge.

My strategy for the moment is to not worry too much about the shape of the final manuscript and just get the ideas properly developed.

In terms of the material for the seminar, I consider chapters 1 and 2 – for the first session – in pretty final form. Chapter 3 is a complete draft and has been through many versions, but probably has still not reached its final stage. Chapter 5 is only a partial draft, and I am still not completely certain that I will want this chapter in the book.

Readings for sessions

Session 1. Wednesday, May 4. Why be an anti-capitalist?

In this session we will discuss both the normative foundations for evaluating social institutions and the specific diagnosis and critique of capitalism in terms of these criteria. After all, there is little point in worrying about strategies for overcoming capitalism unless there is some fundamental objections to capitalism itself.

Reading:

How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century

Chapter 1. "[Why be an Anti-capitalist](#)"

Chapter 2. "[The Diagnosis and Critique of capitalism](#)"

[Envisioning Real Utopias](#). Chapters 1 and 2.

Session 2. Wednesday, May 11. Varieties of Anti-capitalism

This is in some ways the pivotal seminar session, where we most directly discuss the problem of strategy. There are two objectives for the discussion:

(1) Developing a conceptual map of the range of possible strategies for challenging capitalism. This discussion will revolve around five strategic logics of anti-capitalism: smashing capitalism, taming capitalism, resisting capitalism, escaping capitalism and eroding capitalism.

(2) Exploring the methodological problem of building such conceptual maps. In the course of the past year I have worked through several versions of this conceptual typology. I do not consider any of these typologies as entirely satisfactory, so I welcome whatever criticisms and additional formulations anyone might have.

"Varieties of Anti-capitalism" (Chapter 3 in *How to be...*) is the most recent version of my thinking on these issues. The earlier version, based on my Wheelwright Lecture in Sydney in 2015, appeared in *Jacobin* in December, 2015. In the readings I have included the earlier version along with a critique of that paper by Dylan Riley and my reply to his critique.

Reading:

How to be an Anti-capitalist for the 21st Century. Chapter 3. "[Varieties of Anti-capitalism](#)"

A debate in *Jacobin* over these themes:

"[How to be an Anticapitalist Today](#)", Erik Olin Wright, *Jacobin*. December 12, 2015

"[An Anti-capitalism that can Win](#)", by Dylan Rile, *Jacobin*. January 6, 2016. [Link](#)

"[How to Think about \(and win\) Socialism](#)", by Erik Olin Wright. *Jacobin*. April 27, 2016

"Alternative typologies of strategic logics" (unpublished memo)

[Envisioning Real Utopias](#). Chapters 9-11

Session 3. Wednesday, May 18. Real Utopias

I have not been able to write a draft of chapter 4 of the new book, the one which most directly discusses real utopias. For this session, therefore, we will focus on the relevant chapters from *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

Reading:

[Envisioning Real Utopias](#). Chapters 5-7

Session 4. Wednesday, May 25. Real Utopias and the Capitalist State

At the center of skepticism about the possibility of real utopias eroding the dominance of capitalism is the argument that the capitalist character of the state makes this impossible. In order to play a significant role in transcending capitalism, real utopias would have to be supported by the state in various ways. But if emancipatory forms of economic activities and relations ever grew to the point of threatening the dominance of capitalism, they would simply be crushed by the capitalist state. This is a serious objection. This session will examine the idea that in spite of the in-built class biases of the capitalist state, it might still be possible to create new rules of the game through the capitalist state that can facilitate the expansion of real utopias.

Reading:

How to be an Anti-capitalist. Chapter 5. "[The Capitalist State and Real Utopias](#)" (partial draft) [Envisioning Real Utopias](#), chapter 8. "Elements of a Theory of Transformation," especially pp. 209-302.

Andre Gorz, "[Reform and Revolution](#)," *The Socialist Register*, 1968