

In praise of democratic market socialism in the 21st century

Organization
2022, Vol. 29(4) 781–788
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DOI: 10.1177/1350508420928525
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How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century. Erik Olin Wright. London; New York: Verso, 2019. pp. 176. £12.99 (hbk). ISBN: 9781788736053.

How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century is the last book of Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright, who sadly passed away in January 2019. The book builds on his ongoing research on envisioning real utopias in and beyond capitalism (Wright, 2010) and is written particularly for the lay audience. It is a timely book considering the distaste against the current neo-liberal phase of capitalism in which even the major proponents of free market economy call for systemic change (Wolf, 2019), and the interest in socialist ideas and alternatives are on the rise (Milburn, 2019). As a contribution,¹ Wright not only provides a refreshing critique of capitalism but also offers a solid position regarding the tension between class and identities, transformative role of the state, and the scale of organizing at multiple levels for social change. While he avoids giving any recipe or a universal template, he posits how a variety of struggles and egalitarian and solidaristic economic practices can create synergy to ‘erode capitalism’ and build democratic market socialism in the 21st century.

In addition to the preface and the afterword offered by Michael Burawoy, the book is structured into six chapters. In the first and second chapters, alongside providing a critique of capitalist economy, Wright suggests a normative position based on equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity which would drive anticapitalist thought and practice. Emphasizing the importance of social justice, participation, and cooperation as the main tenets of a just society, he argues how capitalism inhibits these values—and humanity itself—by its definition and operation. Chapter 3 then delves into a discussion of strategy (i.e. what is to be done?) and introduces five strategies which are derived from the historical anticapitalist experiments—smashing capitalism (i.e. revolutionary politics and party), dismantling capitalism (i.e. transition to democratic socialism through state-led reforms, mixed economy), taming capitalism (i.e. neutralizing harms of capitalism through social democratic parties, regulations, and redistribution through state), resisting capitalism (i.e. from outside of the state, grassroots, unions), and escaping capitalism (i.e. community activism, utopian communities, microalternatives). While Wright does not give any credit to the potential of a revolutionary rupture today (p. 41–42), he argues that the combination of these strategies will help ‘erode capitalism’ which would resemble the dissolution of feudalism due to the rise of proto-capitalist practices. In Chapter 4, Wright introduces how democratic socialism would work beyond capitalism in practical terms. Through a discussion of power in the economy, the state, and the social, he argues for a position where capitalism and statism should be subordinated to social power/socialism in the form of economic democracy. For this to happen, he suggests immanent alternatives and proposals which should emerge through various configurations of (including but not limited to) the universal basic income (UBI), cooperative market economy, social and solidarity economy, banking

as a public utility, and nonmarket economic organizations. These practices can be considered as the building blocks of re-organizing economy and society so that noncapitalist practices gradually expand. In the penultimate chapter, by emphasizing the internal contradictions and contested functionality of the state, Wright argues how as an institution the state can contribute to the prospects of democratic socialism. Hence, he emphasizes that the state will inevitably play a very significant role due to the need of coordinating larger public expenses in the face of global climate crisis and shifting technology and employment trends. For practical terms, he calls for democratizing the state (by undoing neoliberalism) and deepening democracy (through decentralization and empowerment, new forms of citizenship participation (e.g. participatory budget), new democratized electoral rules and democratic representation). In the final chapter, Wright engages with the debates related to the agents of transformation. Eroding capitalism as a strategic vision needs the concurrent operation of forces from above (i.e. changing the rules of the game—taming and dismantling capitalism with the state) and below (i.e. changing the moves in the game—escaping and resisting capitalism) through a web of interconnected collective agency. As he writes, ‘various kinds of organizations and associations through which people join together to cooperate in pursuit of their goals’ (p. 124), including but not limited to labor unions, political parties, alliances, and social movements. In order to mobilize this web of actors, Wright reminds readers about the importance of values (equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, community/solidarity) as a common, starting ground. Finally, he suggests four guidelines for progressive social change which would guide the democratic experiments—taking values to the center as fundamentals of democratic socialism and advance them through concrete socioeconomic policies; using these values to link class interests and emancipatory identity politics for unity; restoring and deepening democracy to reduce capitalism’s dominance; and combining strategies from above and below to erode capitalism.

This book is a well-structured and systematically written manifesto for organizing within and against the capitalist dynamics to build democratic socialism in the 21st century. It provides a complementary view on the accumulation of social struggles to democratize the state and economy which involves various actors (e.g. unions, political parties, grassroots, anarchists) and acknowledges the incoherent and heterogeneous character of the markets and the state (cf. Gibson-Graham, 1996) as the intervention points to expand noncapitalist and anticapitalist practices. ‘Values’ as the principle for organizing is presented as a path forward to integrate identity politics into class struggles. Although some readers may be critical of such a values-driven normative perspective to criticize capitalism, perhaps Wright (as a scholar of social class (Wright, 1985)) has a point to argue that class interests are not good enough anymore to mobilize people given the fragmented nature of the classes today. This would suggest that progressive forces may need to engage with ethico-political interventions in which value-based demands would lead to transformation of organizations and society (see also Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). The possibility of an alternative democratic socialism, through encompassing noncapitalist/anticapitalist immanent practices and democratic, egalitarian, and solidaristic economy, gives much hope.

Nevertheless, most likely due to the analytical Marxist position Wright holds, it feels as though there is an implicit scientific and, to some extent, mechanistic view in regard to the nature of social change (see Wright, 1994: 182–185). Although Wright emphasizes that the future will be constructed through experimentation of anticapitalist struggles in different contexts, the way that he builds his arguments about socio-economic policies gives a sense of certainty about the course of actions and social change. For instance, UBI is presented as a key problem solver, which would eventually lead to various positive social outcomes (p. 74–75; cf. Pitts and Dinerstein, 2017; Srnicek and Williams, 2015). Moreover, the essential role given to the state can be questioned whether we need such institutionalized formations in our future (cf. Hardt and Negri, 2017). While Wright acknowledges the contested nature of the state and argues

for a decentralized participatory governance model (cf. Bookchin, 2015), inevitably the state emerges as a major powerful institution to facilitate social change and, therefore, the political party (as another institutionalized political form) takes a central position (cf. Dean, 2016). Yet, as foreseen by Wright in the book, and as the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis confirms, the state still has a very critical and central role in such unprecedented times.

Overall, this book is an outcome of more than 40 years of scholarship dedicated to Marxism and progressive social change. As Burawoy writes in the afterword,

by thematizing capitalism and the strategies for its transformation, by delineating concrete institutions that could carry us forward, Erik Wright gave us a Marxism that was sociology's final conclusion and ultimate critique, a practical and theoretical project that would invite everyone to forge a better world. (p. 156).

In sum, this book offers a pleasurable read, for it invites people not to imagine but practice democratic socialism in contemporary times.

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Note

1. It is beyond the scope of this review to do a comparative analysis about alternatives and postcapitalism, but Wright's recent research project can be read along with Dean (2016), Gibson-Graham (1996), Hardt and Negri (2017), and Srnicek and Williams (2015) to see how these discussions boil down to the categories of class, identities, the role of the state, and the scale of mobilization.

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