Special Issue Article

Love and Marxism*

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Abstract
Erik Olin Wright's scholarship is often considered to be formed by two entirely disjoint projects represented by his early work on class analysis and his later writings on “real utopias.” This essay uses Michael Burawoy’s recent formulation of the “two Marxisms” thesis as a foil to argue for the continuities rather than discontinuities in the body of work produced by Wright. More particularly, the critical spirit of the real utopias project infused Wright’s work on class analysis from its inception. It is further argued that the limitations Wright encountered in realizing those critical aims directly seeded the search in his later work for institutional design principles and an explicit articulation of normative values that could undergird alternatives to capitalism.

Keywords
Erik Olin Wright, Marxism, class analysis, real utopias

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*This essay is part of a special issue of Politics & Society celebrating and examining the life and work of longtime board member Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019).
A common theme in retrospective analyses of Erik Olin Wright’s scholarship is the distinct nature of the two main projects that made up Erik’s intellectual journey through Marxism. Through the early to middle years of his career, Erik was the hard-hitting empiricist, puzzling through the conundrums presented by class structure in advanced industrial capitalism. In his middle to later years, Erik’s emphasis changed; he embraced a normative project that sought to elucidate (and through his various engagements with scholars and activists, actively to promote) the principles by which “real utopias” could be carved out from actually existing capitalist societies. Different interlocutors of Erik’s work might weight these two projects differently, giving greater priority to one or the other in understanding the whole, but there seems to be little question of a fundamental divide in Erik’s work.1

Among observers of Erik’s long career, perhaps none is better positioned to characterize its broad trajectory than Michael Burawoy, Erik’s lifelong friend and collaborator, who recently published an illuminating appreciation of Erik’s scholarship in New Left Review.2 In that essay, which has been republished in the present issue of Politics & Society, Burawoy leans hard on this “two Marxisms” formulation, observing a schism between Erik’s early empirical work on class analysis, in which broader “utopian” strivings are suppressed, and Erik’s later utopian project, in which class analysis falls out. Borrowing from Alvin Gouldner, Burawoy names the first of these projects Erik’s “scientific Marxism” and the second, Erik’s “critical Marxism.”3 Burawoy further suggests that these two projects are fully disjoint—Erik, in other words, experienced something akin to what Louis Althusser described as Marx’s “epistemological break.”4 Here is how Burawoy describes the transformation in Erik’s work:

From science to critique; from a mapping of social structure to the project of social transformation; from the study of real mechanisms to the study of possible futures; from scientific neutrality to explicit value foundations; from measurement at a distance to engagement at close quarters; from ideology as distortion to ideology as a moral force; from politics as epiphenomenal to politics as integral to the advance of real utopias; from the determinism of objective structures to the erosion of capitalism.5

At one level, there is little to take issue with in this characterization of Erik’s work. There are certainly different stages in Erik’s career, and the work on class structure undeniably has a different flavor—and perhaps a different set of objectives, although that point is more open to interpretation—than does the work on real utopias. At the same time, I find myself resisting Burawoy’s characterization of Erik’s two Marxisms. I think the reason for my resistance is that, just as with the claim that there is a “critical” Marx and a “scientific” Marx, this is not simply a descriptive claim but an evaluative one. If one is an enthusiast of the early Marx, it is usually at the expense of the Marx of Capital, and vice versa. Although Burawoy’s contrast of Erik’s two Marxisms is not quite as stark as that, I discern a clear valuing in Burawoy’s formulation of the Marxism of real utopias over the Marxism of Erik’s work on class structure. While appreciating the analytical rigor and precision of the early work, Burawoy suggests that Erik in his “scientific Marxism” succumbs to professional pressures, the political
impetus behind the work blunted by the methodological imperatives of what over time becomes a fairly conventional stratification analysis. Burawoy’s narrative has Erik, after a long period lost in the wilderness of professional sociology, finding his way home to sociological Marxism when he embarks on the investigation of real utopias. This is the culmination of Erik’s expansive body of work, where his early promise as a radical thinker reaches its full realization.

Now it is of course Burawoy’s prerogative to prefer the Erik of real utopias to the Erik of class analysis—with that, I have no argument. And in fact, I suspect that Erik’s own self-assessment—to judge from the scattered comments he left in his writings—might be similar. Nor does Burawoy’s narrative, taken on its own terms, strike me as inaccurate; Erik himself was honest (and to my mind, admirably self-reflective) about the role that the desire for professional recognition and status had in shaping his early work and career, as well as the way that the methodological tools he was working with constrained the kinds of questions he could ask and answer. Nevertheless, I do want to suggest that something is lost from our understanding of both the projects that make up Erik’s unique contribution to Marxism and to social science by pulling them so far apart. Just as reading the late Marx is enriched, I believe, by an engagement with the early Marx, so I think scientific and critical elements are more fully intertwined in all of Erik’s work than Burawoy’s formulation allows.

Accordingly, I want to re-narrate Erik’s intellectual biography using Burawoy’s essay as a foil, emphasizing points of connection between the two strands of Erik’s work rather than the disjunctures that Burawoy’s account highlights. In the following discussion, I will highlight the continuities between Erik’s work on class analysis and real utopias by suggesting that the “critical” elements of the latter were never as foreign to Erik’s “scientific” Marxism as Burawoy suggests is the case. It might be more difficult to argue for continuities in the other direction—that is, by demonstrating that Erik’s early “empiricism” pervades the normative project he embraced more fully in his later work. I do not attempt to make that argument here, but I would merely suggest that the real utopias project was not devoid of empirics (as Burawoy himself notes when he suggests that Erik reinvented himself as an ethnographer late in his career). Rather, it was empirical work that rested on very different methodological and epistemological premises than Erik’s early “multivariate Marxism.”

Let me start with the formulation of the problem of the middle classes—the signature contribution of Erik’s “scientific Marxism,” to adopt Burawoy’s terminology. As early as graduate school, Erik was aware that the simple, polarized model of the class structure derived from Marx’s writings was inadequate to grasp the complexity of advanced industrial capitalism. He sought therefore to generate a more complex mapping of the class structure by exploring the problem of the middle classes—individuals who were neither fully capitalists nor workers but occupied what he called “contradictory class locations.” Erik’s original attempt to deal with the problem of the middle classes melded Marxian concepts of domination and exploitation, although in a manner that gave top billing to domination: to be in a contradictory location was simultaneously to exercise and experience domination in different relations. Erik soon became disenchanted with this approach precisely because he felt it privileged
domination over exploitation; accordingly, a later formulation of the problem of the middle classes—the one he elaborated in his 1985 book *Classes*—was conceptualized solely in terms of exploitation.¹⁰ Now, on its face, this shift from domination to exploitation in Erik’s conception of class appears to provide strong evidence for Burawoy’s two Marxisms formulation. Domination is closely associated with Marx’s concept of alienation, especially as elaborated in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which the early Marx railed against a system in which the capitalist is empowered to order the worker at her task. Here is where the direct experience of the worker in production potentially generates possibilities for class formation and class struggle—precisely the sort of issues that have been at the heart of Burawoy’s own ethnographic investigations of *relations in production* (as opposed to relations of production).¹¹ Does the pivot here from domination to exploitation not put politics and struggle at one remove?

Perhaps it does. But here I think it is important to be clear on Erik’s reasons for making this maneuver. Erik preferred an elaboration of class that was centered on exploitation precisely because the concept of exploitation implies a set of material interests that can be mapped onto concrete class locations. By contrast, while domination is an integral part of the lived experience of class relations, Erik suggested that it is a more abstract concept that cannot be specified with the same level of concreteness. Here was Erik’s legendary empiricism on full display! But note how Erik explained this development in his work:

> The new class concept [based on exploitation] provided a particularly nuanced empirical map for studying the relationship between class structure and class formation. . . . By introducing three distinct dimensions [of exploitation]—dimensions based on [control of] capital assets, organization assets, and skill assets—the picture of class structure can become quite differentiated. The proliferation of concrete structural “locations” within the map allows for much more subtle empirical investigation of the ways in which people in these locations become collectively organized into class formations.¹²

This passage makes clear that the motivation behind Erik’s extensive and detailed empirical investigations into class structure reflected his firm belief that solving the problem of the middle class was key to creating a viable socialist politics. I do not see a hard separation between Erik’s scientific and critical Marxisms here.

It is possible to make this point even more directly—Erik’s preference for exploitation in mapping the class structure reflected not only the utility of the concept for studying the class structure in ways that could inform socialist strategy but also the manner in which the concept of exploitation itself expressed a deep normative commitment to human liberation. As Erik wrote,

> [An] emancipatory normative theory is directly implicated in [the concept of] exploitation. . . . As an explanatory concept, exploitation is meant to identify one of the central mechanisms through which class structure explains class conflict. Class relations are thought to explain conflict in part because classes do not simply have *different* material interests which are contingently conflictual; their material interests are *intrinsically*
antagonistic by virtue of being based on exploitation. Identifying such class relations as exploitative . . . implies a moral judgment about the inequalities generated within those relations. . . . The emancipatory ideal of radical egalitarianism—ending class exploitation—is thus implicated in the very conceptualization of class itself.\textsuperscript{13}

It is true that as Erik’s empirical project became more ambitious and his map of class locations more elaborate, he became increasingly doubtful that the work would yield the political gains he had initially anticipated. As early as 1987, when The Debate on Classes was first published, he was already harboring doubts. A footnote in that text reads, “While I continue to believe that solving the conceptual problems in class structure analysis is important, I no longer feel that it provides the key to understanding the more general problem of variations in class formation and possibilities for the creation of radical coalitions.”\textsuperscript{14} We see the beginnings here of a shift in Erik’s preoccupations that ultimately seeds the real utopias project. Here I disagree with Burawoy’s suggestion that there was “remarkably little cross pollination” between Erik’s work on class structure and his investigation of real utopias, and that “each developed independently of the other.”\textsuperscript{15} On the contrary, I detect a clear lineage from the first project to the second—we might even say that the new grew up in the bosom of the old!

The best evidence for this interpretation, I think, is Erik’s essay “Marxism after Communism,” first published in 1993 just as Erik was pivoting to the real utopias project.\textsuperscript{16} In this essay, Erik considered the fate of Marxism in the light of the historic defeat of communism—the context in which the essay was written lends credibility to Burawoy’s contention that the shift he detects in Erik’s work reflected, at least in part, the changing political context in which Erik was carrying out his research program. After first considering the challenges to Marxism presented by the fall of communism, Erik’s essay then suggested that Marxism involves three distinct “nodes”: a class analysis, a theory of a historical trajectory, and an emancipatory project. These nodes, Erik observed, were seamlessly integrated in classical Marxism: Marx’s account of a polarized class structure gave rise to a theory of a historical trajectory toward an emancipatory future. In more recent times, however, the unity of the three nodes has eroded: “Today,” Erik wrote,

relatively few Marxists still believe that class analysis alone provides a sufficient set of causes for understanding the historical trajectory of capitalism, and even fewer feel that this historical trajectory is such that the likelihood of socialism has an inherent tendency to increase with capitalist development.\textsuperscript{17}

Erik signaled a further problem: although classical Marxism established the viability of socialism simply by demonstrating the nonviability of capitalism, this strategy is no longer workable in a context in which the failure of capitalism cannot be assumed. Two conclusions followed from this analysis. First, radicals have to think not in terms of deterministic historical trajectories but rather in terms of contingent historical possibilities; and, second, it is necessary to make the positive case for socialism on its own terms, not simply as the negation of capitalism.
Both points are picked up and elaborated more fully in the 2002 article “Sociological Marxism” that Erik coauthored with Burawoy. But rather than see those insights as representing a departure from Erik’s class analysis, as Burawoy does, I see them as growing directly out of Erik’s earlier research program. It is the complexity of the terrain of social class that lies behind Erik’s skepticism about the possibilities for a “ruptural” transformation in the mode of production, redirecting his attention instead toward the search for democratic, egalitarian, and participatory alternatives within the cracks and crevices of the existing economic system that could potentially erode its capitalist logic. On a related note, in a context in which many individuals have class interests that are fundamentally ambiguous, neither “capitalist” nor “worker,” the case for socialism must be made not on the basis of material interests but on explicit normative criteria. Notably, both these elements are foundational to the real utopias project in its mature form: the first finds expression in Erik’s explorations of institutional design principles laid out in Envisioning Real Utopias; and the second is most fully developed in How to Be an Anti-capitalist in the 21st Century, a work in which Erik explores the values—equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, community/solidarity—that undergird real utopias. Thus, rather than as leaving Erik’s class analysis behind, I think it is more accurate to see Erik’s elaboration of real utopias as grounded firmly in it.

I want to close on a more personal note. Burawoy writes in the final section of his essay that although Erik developed “two Marxisms,” there was really only “one Erik Wright”—a man who will be remembered, Burawoy writes, for “his abiding commitment to truth, to clarity, to dialogue, community and social justice.” I am in full accord with Burawoy’s characterization of “one Erik” here, although, as Burawoy also notes, Erik was in his final months moving toward a different formulation that wove together the strands of his work and life—one that he expressed in terms of love. Erik seemed at least a little surprised to discover that it was love that undergirded his intellectual and political commitments, in exactly the same way that love drew him into an enriching and sustaining community of family, friends, and students. I, for one, was not surprised; Erik’s epiphany seemed totally in keeping with what I had always intuited about him as a sociologist, as a Marxist, and as a human being.

I learned of Erik’s cancer shortly after it was diagnosed in April of 2018. Paradoxically, this devastating news came as I was working on a paper for a conference to mark the 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth and 150th anniversary of the publication of Capital. In preparation for that meeting, I had been spending the semester delving back into texts that I first read twenty-four years earlier in my first year of graduate school at the University of Wisconsin—texts that, outside the “greatest hits” I now teach in my graduate and undergraduate social theory courses, I had not revisited in all the years since. Erik was very much on my mind that spring as I worked my way through Marx’s early writings, the Grundrisse, and Capital—although not because I had studied these texts with him. Erik was wary of what he referred to as “Marxology,” and accordingly he included very few, if any, original texts from Marx in his teaching. If Marxism was truly a social science, I remember him telling me, the knowledge it produced was cumulative. It would be a sad statement on the enterprise
of Marxism if the best we could offer was a text written in 1867! Notwithstanding that assessment, Erik tolerated our youthful indulgences, and there was a large group of students in the spring semester of 1995 who took Erik’s “Marxism and Social Science” course in the morning and then marched across campus to study the Marxist classics in Jess Gilbert’s seminar in the afternoon. The combination was intoxicating; I have rarely felt so intellectually alive as I did that semester. Rereading those works in the spring of 2018, I traveled back in time, and felt Erik’s presence strongly, just as I learned that his life circumstances had suddenly become tenuous.

I recovered something else other than these vivid memories in my reading that spring when I came across a little-known gem in the Marx canon—Marx’s 1844 essay on James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy*. As Erik frequently observed, Marxist theory (and Marx himself) thought about emancipation largely in terms of the negation of the ills of capitalism.22 Communism was characterized as the absence of alienation, the absence of exploitation, the absence of inequality, and so on. But how could we characterize communism when viewed in more positive terms? Here Marx, and for the most part Marxist theory too, fell silent. As Erik noted, as long as the expectation was that capitalism was doomed to fail, there wasn’t much need to dwell on such matters. Once it became clear, however, that capitalism’s demise was neither imminent nor inevitable, characterizing utopia in more positive terms became necessary to securing it—a task Erik embraced with vigor in his later work.

Notably, in the essay on James Mill, Marx does offer a more positive characterization of what it would mean to live free of capitalism, describing the experience of producing directly as a human being without having one’s labor “mediated” through the exchange of an external object. It is interesting that Marx expresses this utopian idea, as Erik also did in his final months, in terms of love. I cannot think of anything that better expresses who Erik was as a scholar and a teacher than Marx’s description of production without alienation; and it makes me realize that the most real utopia of all was the one Erik’s students got to experience in the lecture halls and classrooms of the University of Wisconsin. So, with apologies to Erik for indulging in what he would likely consider “Marxology,” I would like to conclude with a passage from Marx’s essay that, I believe, encapsulates Erik’s spirit exceedingly well.

Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings. In that event each of us would have *doubly affirmed* himself and his neighbor in his production. (1) In my *production* I would have objectified the *specific character* of my *individuality* and for that reason I would both have enjoyed the *expression* of my own individual *life* during my activity and also, in contemplating the object, I would experience an individual pleasure, I would experience my personality as an *objective sensuously perceptible power beyond all shadow of doubt*. (2) In your use or enjoyment of my product I would have the *immediate* satisfaction and knowledge that in my labour I had gratified a *human* need, i.e., that I had objectified *human nature* and hence had procured an object corresponding the needs of another *human being*. (3) I would have acted for you as the *mediator* between you and the species, thus I would be acknowledged by you as the complement of your own being, as an essential part of yourself. I would thus know myself to be confirmed both in your thoughts and your love. (4) In the individual expression of my own life I would have
brought about the immediate expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realized my authentic nature, my human, communal nature.23

One Erik, indeed.

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Notes

1. I base this conclusion in part on the views expressed by former colleagues, collaborators, and students at a conference honoring the life and legacy of Erik Olin Wright held at the Havens Wright Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison on November 1–2, 2019. This essay was originally prepared as a contribution to the conference.

2. Michael Burawoy, “A Tale of Two Marxisms: Remembering Erik Olin Wright,” New Left Review 121 (January–February 2020): 67–98. Given Burawoy’s unique relationship to Erik, it feels somewhat presumptuous to take a different view of Erik’s scholarship, as I do in this essay. My own perspective on Erik’s work is not based on the same sort of deep and sustained dialogue that he shared with Burawoy over many decades. Instead, it is shaped by the experience of having been a student of Erik’s during the period in the mid- to late 1990s in which he was transitioning from his work on class analysis to his work on real utopias.


4. Louis Althusser, For Marx (London: Verso, 2005). The analogy doesn’t fit perfectly, as Erik traversed these stages in the opposite order to that alleged to be the case for Marx, from a scientific to a critical Marxism rather than from a critical to a scientific Marxism.


6. “Adopting the scientific practices of conventional social science risks neutralizing the revolutionary aspirations of Marxism. Above all, there is the risk of narrowing the field of legitimate questions to those that are tractable with these sophisticated tools. Statistically rigorous data analysis tends to restrict investigations to problems that are easily quantifiable; rational choice theory tends to direct attention to those problems of strategic interaction that can be formally modeled within the repertoire of game theory models. Such potential restriction on the domain of inquiry imposed by the choice of scientifically
rigorous methods poses serious threats to the political vitality of radical thought. . . . These risks need to be acknowledged and resisted. But to respond to them by refusing to build enclaves of radical scholarship within leading universities robs Marxism of the capacity to play an effective role in the academy; and to cope with these risks by rejecting these analytical and scientific methods altogether undermines the ability of Marxism to enhance its theoretical understandings of the world in ways which will enable it, once again, to play an effective role in politics as well.” Erik Olin Wright, Interrogating Inequality (London: Verso, 1994), 197–98.


8. The original phrase was more cumbersome: “contradictory locations within class relations.” See Erik Olin Wright, Class, Crisis, and the State (London: Verso, 1978).


10. Ever one to revise and update his thinking, Erik in his mature class analysis rejoined domination and exploitation, elaborating a more sophisticated version of contradictory class locations. See Erik Olin Wright, Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).


13. Wright, Interrogating Inequality, 239.


16. The article was originally published in New Left Review but later reprinted in revised form in Interrogating Inequality, which is the version of the essay I refer to here.

17. Wright, Interrogating Inequality, 240.


20. Burawoy, “Tale of Two Marxisms,” 81–82, acknowledges these same connections but seems to draw a different lesson from them than I do.

21. Ibid., 98.

22. This idea is expressed especially eloquently in “Marxism after Communism” and “Sociological Marxism.”


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