

# Taking the social in socialism seriously.

Wright, Erik Olin.

Cita:

Wright, Erik Olin (2012). *Taking the social in socialism seriously*. *Socio Economic Review*, 10, 386-402.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/erik.olin.wright/7>

ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/paqp/m51>

upheavals and resort to them whenever needed. The French bourgeoisie did not refrain from cooperating with elements of the old order, but this cooperation was subsumed under revolutionary threats (and an overall ruptural vision) and, therefore, did not serve to restore aristocratic privileges in the long run. Likewise, symbiotic strategies could serve the transition to socialism *if* they are subordinated to revolutionary and interstitial ones over the long term. This intermittent revolutionary process would slowly build socialism over the span of a few centuries and perhaps even lay the groundwork for a post-socialist society.

The events in North Africa have demonstrated that the question is not whether new revolutionary uprisings will take place; it is whether they will take a sustainably social route. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionary upheavals started out with social as well as political demands, but in time, political demands started to outweigh (if not drown out) social demands. This was partially because the international intellectual environment, in addition to the major national political actors, focused on liberal democratic grievances at the expense of social ones. One reason for this restricted focus is the depletion of the intellectual arsenal that links political struggles to social issues. A public task of social science is, then, providing some of the tools that the actors of these uprisings could use to write the social into the revolution through connecting elements of rupture, symbiosis and a civic spirit.

## Taking the social in socialism seriously

**Erik Olin Wright**

*Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA*

*Correspondence: wright@ssc.wisc.edu*

Two broad themes are especially prominent in the insightful and generous comments made by Dylan Riley, Marion Fourcade and Cihan Tuğal on my book, *Envisioning Real Utopias*: the first concerns the conception I propose of socialism as a vision beyond capitalism; the second, my approach to the problem of social transformation, especially my analysis of ruptural strategies. In the discussion which follows, I take each of these themes in turn. In order to set the stage for the discussion, in each case I will begin by briefly outlining the central

components of the framework I develop in the book.<sup>1</sup> Once this is done I will engage the critical issues raised in the three commentaries.

## 1. The conception of socialism as a vision beyond capitalism

### *The framework*

The central theoretical task of *Envisioning Real Utopias* is to develop a coherent set of concepts for rethinking the problem of emancipatory alternatives to capitalism. The core of this endeavour is a distinction among three ideal types of economic structures: capitalism, statism and socialism. I differentiate these structures along two dimensions: the form of *ownership* of the means of production and the form of *power* that most pervasively controls economic activity. Here are the key definitions in the book (pp. 120–121):

- *Capitalism* is an economic structure within which the means of production are privately owned and the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of economic power. Investments and the control of production are the result of the exercise of economic power by owners of capital.
- *Statism* is an economic structure within which the means of production are owned by the state and the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism.
- *Socialism* is an economic structure within which the means of production are socially owned and the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed ‘social power’. ‘Social power’ is power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions of various sorts in civil society. . . . If ‘democracy’ is the label for the subordination of state power to social power, ‘socialism’ is the term for the subordination of economic power to social power.

These three forms of economic structure never exist in the world in pure forms, but are always combined in various complex ways. I refer to these as *hybrids*. This is the pivotal concept for the substantive analysis, for real utopias are constructed within a world of hybrid economic structures. Hybrids vary in the way these

<sup>1</sup>In the two years since the final draft of the book was completed in August 2009, the framework of analysis has undergone some changes. In my exposition here I will present the most recent iteration and indicate where this differs from the earlier formulation.

different forms of power are connected and interact. To call an economy ‘capitalist’ is thus a shorthand for a more cumbersome expression such as ‘an economic hybrid combining capitalist, statist and socialist economic relations within which capitalist relations are dominant’. The idea of hybrid can be used to analyse the concrete forms of economic structure within any unit of an economic system: within firms, sectors, regional economies, national economies, even the global economy. In these terms, then, the possibility of socialism revolves around the problem of enlarging and deepening the socialist component of the hybrid and weakening the capitalist component.<sup>2</sup>

The substantive theoretical and empirical elaboration of these conceptual elements involves specifying the different ways in which social empowerment can be increased within economic structures. In the book I refer to these as seven *paths* of social empowerment, but I now think that a better term would be structural *configurations*. To make these configurations easy to identify, I developed a visual vocabulary for showing different patterns in the interconnection among the three forms of power within economic systems. Figure 1 illustrates the basic components.<sup>3</sup> The arrows in these diagrams indicate the direction of influence of one form of power over the use of another; the width of the arrows indicates the strength of this relationship. Thus, in the first illustration, the use of state power is subordinated to social power. This is what is meant, conventionally, by political democracy: people voluntarily form associations—most notably political parties—for the purpose of controlling the use of state power through the institutional mechanism of elections. Such configurations can be connected in chains of power relations, as in the third illustration: in this case, corporate influence over the use of state power occurs through the mediation of the way economic power subordinates political parties, a form of social power.

Figure 2 illustrates the different aggregate configurations of forms of power within a dominant capitalist hybrid economy and a dominant socialist hybrid economy. These diagrams, it must be emphasized, are a way of illustrating the configurations of power *within an economic structure*, not within some broader sense of a society or social system. Thus, the arrows are all directed towards explaining the control over economic activity: investments and production

<sup>2</sup>In the book the synoptic statement of what it means to move a hybrid in the direction of socialism only mentions increasing social empowerment: ‘the greater the degree of social empowerment over the ownership, use and control of economic resources and activities, the more we can describe an economy as socialist’. I thus did not explicitly emphasize the duality of both strengthening the socialist component and weakening the capitalist component. Both are necessary.

<sup>3</sup>The visual vocabulary in these figures differs from the book in two respects: first, the distinction between primary and secondary power relations is missing in the book, and second, there is no explicit discussion of configurations of capitalist empowerment in the book.

Visual representation of power configurations

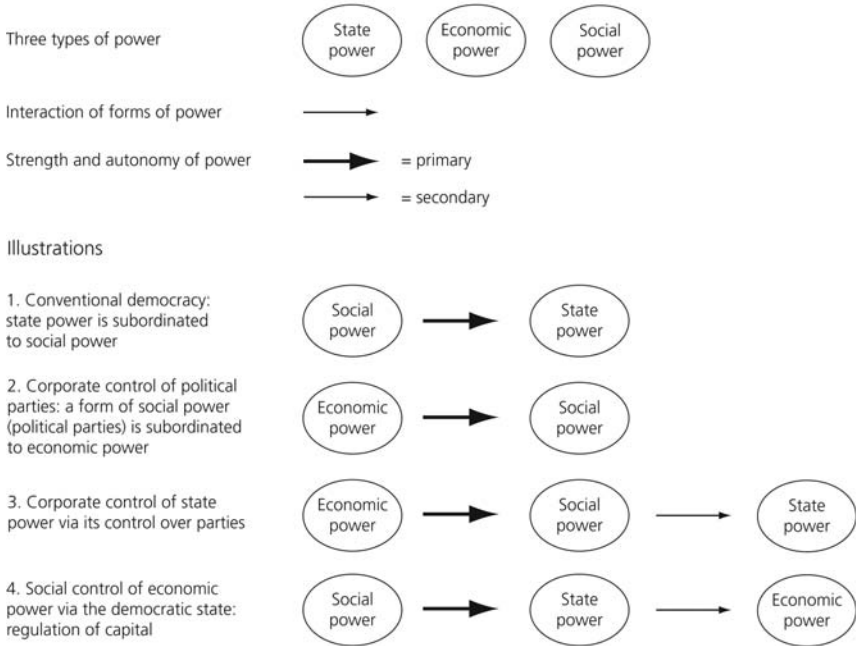


Figure 1 Visual representation and illustrations of power configurations.

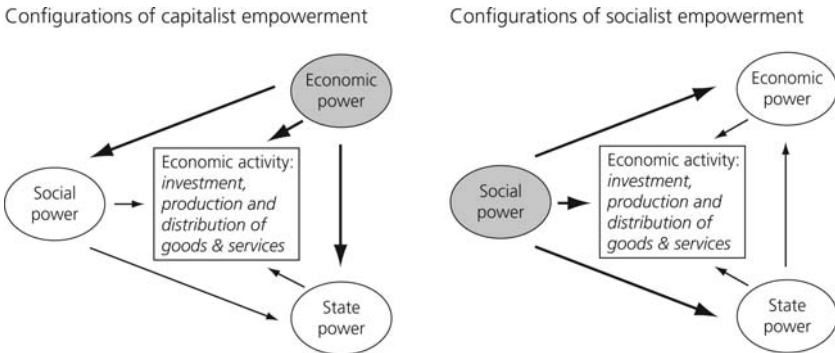
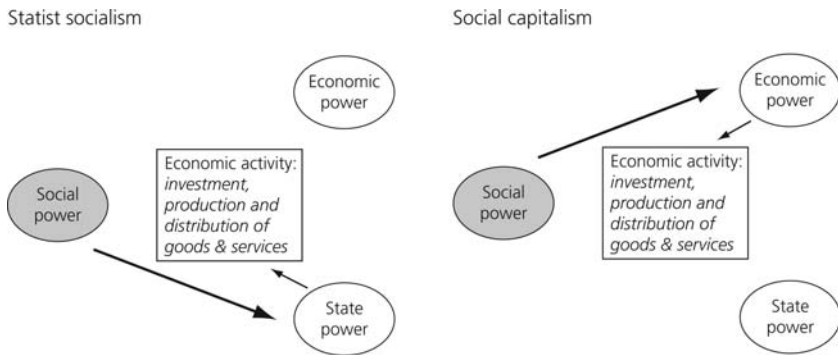


Figure 2 Aggregate configurations of capitalist empowerment and socialist empowerment.

(including the labour process) and distribution of goods and services. In the picture of capitalist empowerment, both social power and state power are subordinated to economic power in the control over economic activity; in the case of socialist empowerment, both economic power and state power are subordinated to social power.



**Figure 3** Two configurations of social empowerment.

The basic purpose for which these schematic representations are used is to differentiate seven different configurations of social empowerment within which specific examples of ‘real utopia’ institutions can be situated. Two of these are illustrated in Figure 3. The left illustration corresponds to the classical definition of socialism: the economy is subordinated to state power—through, for example, state ownership and control over the commanding heights of the economy—while, at the same time, state power is itself subordinated to social power by being democratically accountable to the people. The right illustration, which I refer to as social capitalism, is less familiar. An example would be the solidarity funds of some unions in Canada, where unions use part of their pension funds for private equity investment in geographically rooted capitalist firms as a way of influencing the practices and development strategies of those firms. The other five configurations (not illustrated here) are: social democratic statist regulation, associational democracy, cooperative market economy, social economy and participatory socialism.

### *Criticisms*

Before discussing the criticisms of this general model, some clarification is needed of the theoretical status of the category ‘socialism’ in my analysis. Both Dylan Riley and Marion Fourcade characterize my concept of socialism as in some fundamental way a non-economic conception. Riley describes my ‘view of socialism as ‘social empowerment’ rather than a mode of production’. Fourcade even more explicitly sees my conception as political, not economic:

‘Socialism’ (or rather, social-ism, as Wright puts it) refers to the political conditions that allow for human flourishing: these consist primarily of democratic egalitarian governance practices. . . . The new socialist

utopias will focus on the reform of political relations, to harness positive distributional consequences in the economy. *Envisioning Real Utopias* is thus not a book about capitalism (in the sense of ownership relations) and its critique; it is a book about democracy.

I do not think these characterizations are quite on the mark. I see socialism as a mode of production in the same sense that capitalism is a mode of production: it is defined by a set of social relations of production which, at their core, consist of power relations over the deployment of economic resources in investment, production and distribution.<sup>4</sup> ‘Social empowerment’ is a way of talking about one specific form of those relations of production. Similarly, I would not, as Fourcade does, identify social empowerment with ‘political conditions’ in contrast to ‘ownership’. The term ‘ownership’ is shorthand for a complex set of power relations over the disposal and use of economic resources of various sorts. The ‘rights’ in ‘property rights’ are multidimensional, and different agents can be assigned different rights over different aspects of any given economic resource. If those rights are effective, they correspond to real powers. Social empowerment is a description of one kind of allocation of these rights. So, while it is certainly true that I emphasize that democracy is at the very centre of socialism, this is not to be understood as a characterization of the political conditions outside of economic relations, but rather as the form of power relations inside of economic structures.<sup>5</sup>

Now to the criticisms. I will explore four issues raised in the commentaries: the first two by Riley, and the other two by Fourcade: (1) the neglect of the importance of class in my conceptualization of social empowerment, and especially the ways the enduring power of the capitalist class in hybrid structures is likely to hijack or block any serious movement towards increased social power; (2) the underdevelopment of the idea that socialism is a system of rational deliberation; (3) the dilution of a vision of an economy beyond capitalism through the importation of substantial ‘neoliberal’ elements in my model; (4) the implausibility that the various (real) utopian designs discussed in the book would actually ‘do what they are called to do’.

<sup>4</sup>I prefer the term ‘economic structure’ to ‘mode of production’, since mode of production can be interpreted narrowly as referring only to the production process itself and not the entire structure of economic relations, but in the present context I do not think there is an important, substantive difference.

<sup>5</sup>In addition, it is worth noting that in my formal definition of socialism (cited above) I explicitly refer to social ownership (defined in a narrower way as power over the disposition of surplus) as well as social power.

*Class* Riley states his criticism of my treatment of class power and socialism forthrightly: ‘Wright’s book suffers from one major and highly paradoxical (given its author) flaw: it does not take adequate account of class’. The consequence of this in the analysis of socialism is a failure to recognize the capacity of capitalists themselves to exercise social power through their own voluntary association:

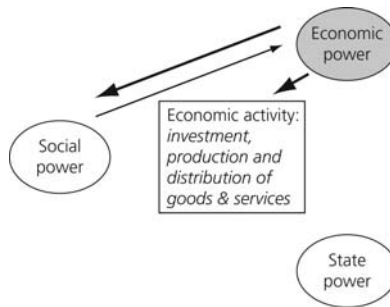
Wright states that “‘socialism’ is the term for the subordination of economic power to social power’ (p. 121). This is not clear. For whether the subordination of economic to social power leads to socialism would seem to depend heavily on who wields it. Capitalists and landowners in particular have historically been very effective at using social power: there are numerous examples of firms and agribusinesses cooperating to share technology, to control output and prices, to establish long-term relations with suppliers, to lobby the government to pursue their interests or to exclude politically radicalized workers. . . . Therefore, without specifying who is exercising social power, there is little reason to think that its extension *per se* is likely to lead to socialism or to even move society in the direction of socialism; there is therefore little reason for socialists to adopt the extension of social power as a normative project.

Riley correctly identifies a problem in the way the argument for social empowerment was elaborated in *Envisioning Real Utopias*. While from time to time I did argue that moves in the direction of socialism require both weakening capitalist power as well as strengthening social empowerment, the systematic part of the exposition focused entirely on the latter. This is clearly unsatisfactory, for it seems to suggest that voluntary collective action over economic activities was always a move in the direction of increasing the weight of social power within the economy. It is for this reason that in Figure 2 above I explicitly lay out the configurations of capitalist empowerment, and I now always describe moves towards a socialist hybrid as requiring both kinds of transformations in power configurations.<sup>6</sup>

Within the formal framework of configurations of power within economic structures, the kind of social empowerment by capitalists Riley refers to above can be represented as in Figure 4. It is true in such cases that social power—as constituted by the collective association of capitalists in organizations like trade associations, marketing cooperatives and cartels—shapes the exercise of economic power over economic activity. This type of social empowerment,

<sup>6</sup>The explicit addition of the configurations of capitalist empowerment to the exposition of the visual vocabulary was directly stimulated by Riley’s comments at the symposium on *Envisioning Real Utopias* in Berkeley where his paper was first presented.





**Figure 4** Corporate associational self-regulation.

however, is itself firmly subordinated to economic power. This is in contrast to the configuration for social capitalism in Figure 3, in which social power has autonomous influence over the exercise of economic power.

*Socialism as rational deliberation* Riley's concern with the problem of capitalist class power is not simply that it can obstruct the kind of popular social empowerment within the economy that I emphasize in my account of socialism. Even more fundamentally, he argues, class divisions block the possibility of developing a rational society. 'Social empowerment is important', he writes,

... because it is a way of *rationalizing* decision-making. From this perspective, the extension of social power is not really a value in itself, but a means to establishing a *rational society*. ... Socialism, then, is a system where the allocation of the social surplus is determined not behind the backs of social actors, but according to agreements based on public discussions governed by the rules of rational critical discourse.

Since true, rational deliberation is only possible where there is homogeneity of interests, a socialism anchored in deliberation is only possible if class divisions are overcome. This emphasis on deliberation, therefore, brings into the centre of the discussion of democracy the necessity of transforming class relations, not just social empowerment in general.

These are compelling points, and a welcome addition to my arguments about configurations of social empowerment as the criterion for evaluating institutional designs for transcending capitalism. However, I would modify them in two respects. First, social empowerment is important not only because it helps create the conditions for rational deliberation, but also because it creates conditions for effective bargaining over interests by popular social forces. Hybrid economic structures constitute settings in which the class power of capital necessarily continues to operate. Unless one believes it is possible to create an alternative to

capitalism without living within hybrid economic structures, then economic processes will be to a significant extent the outcome of bargaining, not just rational deliberation. Building institutional settings in which social power has greater autonomy and plays a bigger role is one way of enhancing the bargaining power of non-capitalist social forces.

Second, the problem of heterogeneous interests which potentially interfere with deliberation cannot be restricted to divisions between the polarized classes of capitalism—capital and labour—however important those might be. On the one hand, class structures are much more complex than this, with a variety of forms of what I have termed contradictory class locations, as well as all sorts of non-class economic divisions that infuse conflicting economic interests into democratic processes. On the other hand, interest heterogeneity goes beyond purely economic divisions and includes a wide range of cultural and social divisions. What this means is democratic decision-making will always confront heterogeneous interests, and thus if deliberation is to have any traction, it has to navigate such heterogeneity rather than wait for a world of homogeneous interests.

*Neoliberal socialism?* Marion Fourcade expresses considerable scepticism about the emancipatory potential of the model of socialism elaborated in *Envisioning Real Utopias*. The very title of her commentary—“The socialization of capitalism or the neoliberalization of socialism?”—suggests this. While in the body of her comment she does not actually claim that the model embraces neoliberalism, she does suggest that it is a diluted vision of socialism in part, at least, because of the extent to which it shares the vocabulary of defenders of the market:

[T]his socialism is very different from the dramatic reorganization of social relations envisioned by Marx and Engels. . . . To the purist, this *diluting of socialism* into a range of options going all the way from Wikipedia to bank-friendly corporatism in Europe will feel like an impossible degrading of the whole project, an abandonment of the ultimate utopia, socialism ‘on the cheap’, at a capitalist or anarchist bargain.

. . . . It is remarkable, in particular, that much of the vocabulary mobilized in this gargantuan canvassing of progressive, emancipatory designs bears some strange similarities to the vocabulary used by advocates of markets.

I do not feel that this characterization of the model of socialism proposed in *Envisioning* is accurate. Fourcade is correct that I argue that there is a positive role for markets within a socialist economy, and some of those arguments are the same as standard defences of the market (for example, that markets can help deal with problems of information complexity), but the analysis of the articulation of

markets to other aspects of the model is entirely different from neoliberalism or other defences of capitalist markets. I think the problem here is that Fourcade reduces my model simply to an economy directly governed by social power—power based on voluntary cooperation for collective action. Voluntary cooperation sounds a lot like markets. But this is not the model of a socialist economy that I propose. That model is built around the concept of hybrids which include both state power and economic power.<sup>7</sup> A socialist hybrid, then, consists of institutions and structures in which social power is the dominant form of power. The seven structural configurations of social empowerment are a way of giving more precision to this idea. In four of these configurations (statist socialism, participatory socialism, social democratic statist economic regulation and associational democracy), the state is crucial. Indeed, the first configuration, statist socialism, corresponds to the classic conception of socialism as ownership and control of the means of production by a democratically accountable state. This is hardly consistent with a neoliberal vision of markets.

I also disagree that the model is properly understood as a wishy-washy, watered-down vision of socialism. The fact that the proposed model of socialism is organized around a pluralism of institutional devices for realizing the emancipatory ideals of a democratic egalitarian economy does not imply that if fully realized this would not constitute a ‘dramatic reorganization of social relations.’ Traditional views of socialism envisioned a unitary institutional model for transcending capitalism, typically some variant of what I term statist socialism. Adding complexity to that single configuration does not constitute ‘socialism on the cheap’, but socialism with some prospect of actual realization.

*The problem of the plausibility of emancipatory consequences* Fourcade raises two important forms of scepticism about whether or not the institutional designs surveyed in *Envisioning* will actually accomplish what they hope to accomplish. The first concerns the problem of the transferability of the empirical cases of real utopian institutional innovations I study from one context to another. Fourcade is quite sceptical that these experiments are, in general, transferable:

[F]or all its remarkable breadth in singling out attractive examples, *Envisioning Real Utopias* rarely asks the question of the institutional

<sup>7</sup>There are passages in *Envisioning* which probably contributed to Fourcade’s interpretation of my model, since I use the term ‘socialism’ both to identify an ideal-type concept and the hybrid form within which social power is dominant. Hybrids, in my argument, are the critical arena for building institutions capable of realizing emancipatory aspirations. The ideal-type concept is designed to identify the key causal mechanisms in the analysis; the hybrid concepts identify the structural configurations within which these mechanisms interact and institutional transformations are located.

and cultural conditions of transplanting each progressive scheme from one setting to another. One of the great contributions of the comparative political economy literature . . . is to have made us painfully aware of the fact that institutional blueprints do not stand on their own, but always in relation to a whole institutional ecology—in other words, a complex system of ‘institutional complementarities’ that feed into one another across domains, from the structure of the education system to job training policies, to the financing of corporations to fertility patterns.

If the constraints of institutional complementarities within socio-economic systems are extremely strong, then it could indeed be the case that institutional innovations in one place would have only marginal relevance to other places. I do not believe, however, that this is generally the case. Socio-economic systems are better thought of as loosely coupled systems with quasi-modular elements than as organic systems with a tight integration of parts. This is why, for example, participatory budgeting, which initially developed under very special historical conditions in Porto Alegre, Brazil, could be copied and adapted in one form or another in over 1000 cities. Some of these have been complete failures, others successful, and of course it is important to do research which tries to explain such variation.<sup>8</sup> The key point here is that the institutional *principles* of participatory budgeting as a way of realizing democratic egalitarian ideals can be deployed in a variety of different concrete institutional designs produced through a process of democratic-experimentalism. Studying the process of democratic experimentalism and adaptation is of course important, but it does not pre-empt the investigation of the institutional principles embedded in successful, exemplary cases. These provide the raw materials for diffusion and experimentation.

Fourcade’s second source of scepticism concerns the lack of attention in the discussion of real utopian institutional designs to macro-economic, system-level problems, especially those connected to finance:

While Wright’s discussion of interstitial schemes like fair trade campaigns is especially rich with examples, it is quite remarkable that—as we are reeling from an economic crisis of epic proportions—the much more consequential questions of macroeconomic organization or financial regulation remain either peripheral, or are dealt with in a regrettably abstract way. There is a good reason for this: those aspects of modern capitalism that are most likely to affect people’s lives

<sup>8</sup>A number of recent studies are doing just this. For a review of this literature, see Archon Fung (forthcoming), ‘Reinventing Democracy in Latin America’, *Perspectives in Politics*.

through these channels are especially difficult to align with emancipatory goals precisely because their highly technical nature makes them particularly vulnerable to expert monopolies I am thinking here, quite specifically, about everything having to do with money: international capital movements, monetary policies, credit rating systems and complex financial instruments.

Here Fourcade has identified a real lacuna in my exploration of real utopias. I provide almost no discussion of institutions capable of advancing emancipatory goals at the macro-system level. In addition to the problem of finance, this would include such things as system-level environmental issues, especially global warming, international migration, global inequalities and global justice and international security. All of these are difficult and important issues, and all pose serious challenges to the idea of real utopias rooted in democratic egalitarian ideals of human emancipation. Any comprehensive transcendence of capitalism has to contend with these issues.

Fourcade is correct that financial systems and other macro-system-level issues cannot plausibly be dealt with through institutions within which the central organizing principle is participatory democracy (although even for these issues it may be possible for there to be some participatory democratic aspects to the institutional design). She is incorrect, however, that the model of socialism I propose implies that all issues must be subsumed under the mechanisms of participatory politics. At least two of the seven configurations of social empowerment are entirely consistent with centralized forms of public administration and regulation: statist socialism and social democratic statist economic regulation.<sup>9</sup> In the book my discussion of these two configurations was extremely limited, mostly because I felt that they were much more familiar than the other configurations of social empowerment. My main concern was with the problem of how within these configurations the exercise of state power could be subordinated to social power, since each of these configurations has historically been vulnerable to failures of democratic accountability: statist socialism turned into authoritarian socialism, and social democratic statist regulation often slides into capitalist statist economic regulation. Nevertheless, these are the configurations in which real utopian forms of regulation of finance, the environment and other system-level problems need to be elaborated.

It could turn out, of course, that no institutional solutions to macro-system-level dynamics are possible that are consistent with democratic egalitarian aspirations and a socialist hybrid. It could be that the only

<sup>9</sup>A third configuration, associational democracy, may also be compatible with centralized regulation in so far as peak bargaining forms of corporatism can be used to formulate the regulations that are then executed through centralized administration.

institutionally stable possibilities for a coherent system of finance are either based on forms of dominant capitalist empowerment or on forms of statist empowerment unaccountable to democratically organized social forces. But I know of no compelling ‘impossibility theorem’ for constructing socialist institutions for financial regulation, so this remains an important arena for future work.

## 2. Transformation

### *The framework*

The model of socialism rooted in social power and the seven configurations of social empowerment provides a framework for exploring institutional designs embodying democratic egalitarian values within a socialist hybrid, but this leaves open the problem of how to move from the current configurations of power to these alternatives. This is the task of a theory of transformation.

A fully developed theory of transformation has four main components: (a) a theory of *social reproduction* which elaborates the obstacles to social transformation; (b) a theory of *contradictions*, which explores the limits, gaps and inconsistencies in the processes of social reproduction which open up possibilities for transformation; (c) a theory of the *trajectory of unintended social change*, which specifies the likely ways that those obstacles and possibilities will change in the future and (d) a theory of *strategies of transformation*, which explores answers to the question ‘what is to be done?’ given the account of reproduction, contradictions and trajectories.

In *Envisioning Real Utopias* I mostly focus on the fourth of these. Anti-capitalist struggles have generally embodied three different strategic logics, which I refer to as *ruptural*, *interstitial* and *symbiotic*:

- *Ruptural transformations* envision creating new institutions of social empowerment through a sharp break with existing institutions and social structures in which existing institutions are destroyed and new ones built in a fairly rapid way. Smash first, build second. A revolutionary scenario for the transition to socialism is the iconic version of this.
- *Interstitial transformations* seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites. The central idea is to get on with the business of building an alternative world in the here and now. If ruptural strategies advocate smashing the state, interstitial strategies mostly ignore the state. This kind of strategic reasoning is associated with certain strands of anarchism.

- *Symbiotic transformations* involve strategies in which extending and deepening the institutional forms of popular social empowerment simultaneously helps solve certain practical problems faced by dominant classes and elites. This involves using the state to foster collaboration with the dominant class and elites. Such strategies are characteristic of left-wing social democracy.

Struggle is a constituent aspect of all three strategic logics. Even though symbiotic strategies seek collaboration between popular social forces and dominant classes, the very possibility of such collaboration often depends on confrontations which block certain kinds of preferred unilateral strategies of elites. Right-wing political forces may have to be defeated politically in order for the conditions for positive class compromise to be created. Interstitial strategies also often have to defend the spaces needed for socially empowered institutions to be created from below, and at times political struggles may be needed to create the legal environment for interstitial initiatives.

While in different times and places one or another of these strategic logics may have some kind of primacy, under conditions of complex, developed capitalist economies, a system-level ruptural strategy is implausible as a way of ushering in a democratic egalitarian alternative to capitalism. The degree of economic disruption that is likely to accompany a system-level rupture would make it extremely unlikely that the process could be sustained long enough to weather the ‘transition trough’ through democratic means, and if anti-democratic means were adopted, it is unlikely that the transformation would result in democratic egalitarian outcomes. This does not mean that aspects of ruptural strategies are completely off the historical agenda, but it does suggest that the prospects for transcending capitalism will depend mainly upon the possibilities of some combination of interstitial and symbiotic strategies of transformation.

### *Criticisms*

Both Cihan Tuğal and Dylan Riley argue that ruptural strategies must be at the centre of any prospect for meaningfully transforming capitalist societies in a socialist direction.

Tuğal’s core thesis is that while the transformation of capitalism also needs both interstitial and symbiotic strategies, these have little prospect for advancing the prospects of socialist transformations unless they are deeply connected to ruptural strategies. He argues that in the twentieth century, it was the threat of revolution which prompted major social reforms:

... twentieth-century European capitalists and state elites have made most of their concessions to the popular classes *because of threats of revolution* and/or Soviet influence... Symbiosis would not be a

sustainable strategy without the (imagined or real) threat of the ‘worker’s revolution’. Once the mentioned threats were removed around the 1980s, the business and bureaucratic elites have reverted to a market capitalism that closely resembles Marx’s diagnostics.

He further argues that even with this background threat of revolution in the twentieth century, the most ambitious interstitial and symbiotic attempts at transforming capitalism in a socialist direction still had only limited effects. Even extremely successful interstitial initiatives, such as Mondragon, the massive conglomerate of worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque Country, tend eventually to function like capitalist firms. The bold symbiotic strategy of Swedish social democracy to partially socialize capitalist corporations through a share-levy proposal in the 1970s was decisively defeated. The implication, Tuğal writes, is that ‘a social democratic transition to socialism is not necessarily more viable than a revolutionary transition, unless we assume that pro-business sectors will for some reason be apathetic and lethargic enough to ignore a gradual evolution into a society where their interests would be ultimately subordinated—a highly unlikely scenario’. Tuğal concludes that the only way of sustaining transformative interstitial and symbiotic experiments is if they are embedded in an overarching long-term ruptural strategy of what he calls ‘intermittent revolution’.

If anything, Riley is even less sanguine about the prospects of interstitial and symbiotic strategies:

After all, ruptural transformations are the only examples of successful transitions to non-capitalist societies (however authoritarian). In contrast, social democracy and anarchism are, from the perspective of achieving socialism, clear examples of *failure*. . . . In the face of these historical examples, it seems unlikely that a real utopia could ever be established without a transformative strategy that includes, but is not restricted to, a decisive rupture.

Furthermore, Riley suggests, the likely developmental trajectory of capitalism in the twenty-first century may make ruptural strategies more attractive. Under conditions of long-term economic stagnation and declining real wages, large numbers of people may be more willing to accept the disruptions of the ‘transition trough’ that would accompany successful system-level attacks on capitalism and thus be able to embrace, in Riley’s words, ‘the central task of any adequate strategy for achieving socialism: destroying the entrenched political and economic power of the capitalist class’.

It is, of course, possible, that both Tuğal and Riley are correct in their diagnosis that ultimately only a decisive systemic rupture with capitalism can create the conditions in which socialism could become the dominant form of economic



relations. If this is so, the implication is probably that socialism, at least if it is understood as a radically democratic organization of economic relations, will be permanently unachievable. Riley's argument that a sustained period of economic stagnation with declining real wages for workers might make the transition through of such a rupture more acceptable is not convincing. Even if, for most people in developed capitalism, insecurity has increased and economic conditions are less favourable than in the past, it is still the case that any serious attempt to decisively overthrow capitalism would provoke a deep and prolonged economic collapse in which life would be immensely more difficult for most people than under the existing institutions. Unless there are good arguments against this prospect—either because the transition through would be much less devastating than this or because the trajectory within capitalism would be catastrophically worse than stagnation—then it seems very unlikely that a rupture with capitalism could be sustained through a democratic process. So, if Tuğal and Riley are correct in their diagnosis that a decisive system-level rupture is needed to go beyond capitalism, then socialism is probably an unachievable alternative to capitalism.

There are reasons, however, to be less certain about this conclusion. To begin with, I do not think that Tuğal is correct that social democratic advances in the twentieth century depended on the threat of anti-capitalist revolution. The biggest gains in social democratic institution-building came in the decades following World War II. This was not a period in which capitalism in the developed countries was threatened by revolutionary overthrow. To be sure, social democratic transformations depended on mobilizations, struggles and the threat of disruption to capital accumulation, but the threat of disruption is not the same as the threat of revolution. In most times and places when there did seem to be a threat of anti-capitalist revolution, this was more likely to provoke something like fascism than social democratic reformism.

I also do not think Riley is correct in his views about the relative historical success of ruptural transformations compared with social democratic reformism. There are two points here. First, the fact that anti-capitalist ruptural strategies have successfully overthrown capitalism and created forms of authoritarian statism is largely irrelevant to the question of the potential role of ruptural strategies in creating democratic egalitarian socialism. Ruptural strategies are rooted in the formula 'destroy first, build second'. The whole issue is what is buildable under this scenario. The historical record does not suggest that democratic egalitarian structures of social empowerment can be robustly constructed in the aftermath of system ruptures.

Second, Riley, and Tuğal as well, underestimate the extent to which both symbiotic transformations and interstitial transformations have significantly interjected socialist elements within capitalism. Both Riley and Tuğal point out that

when Swedish social democracy directly challenged private property through the share-levy plan, the Swedish bourgeoisie successfully mobilized to block this threat to their long-term control over investments. What this shows is that Sweden remains capitalist, and the capitalist class was able to defend its core basis of power. But in many other respects, private property rights have been significantly eroded in Sweden and other instances of social democratic capitalism. One important indicator is the capacity of the state to appropriate the social surplus and allocate it to public purposes: taxation in Sweden is over 45% of GDP. Other indicators include worker rights of representation on boards of directors, regulations of health and safety in the workplace and regulations for environmental protection. All of these remove certain rights from the package of 'private' ownership of the means of production—capitalists are no longer able to do certain things with their capital that they previously were able to do. I agree with Riley that none of these changes constitute 'achieving socialism' in the sense of displacing capitalism as the dominant element in the economic hybrid, but they all constitute significant advances in social power within the various statist configurations of social empowerment.

Riley and Tuğal are also sceptical that interstitial transformations can significantly erode capitalist dominance, and both use the fact that Mondragon functions like a capitalist firm to support this view. Again, Mondragon is a hybrid form, and the capitalist element is important, so of course in some ways it behaves like a capitalist firm. But it also continues to constitute a real alternative to the prevailing capitalist model. Its internal governance structure remains highly democratic, and the general assembly of worker-owners has on occasion voted against the recommendations of management. A recent telling example was the decision by the general assembly, opposed by management, to allow the thousands of employees of a Spanish grocery store chain that had been purchased by Eroski, the Mondragon worker-owned grocery store, to become full owner-members of Eroski.

It is difficult, living in the USA in the second decade of the twenty-first century, to imagine a process of long-term erosion of economic power of capital through interstitial and symbiotic strategies. But it is even more difficult to construct a plausible scenario of a frontal attack on capital resulting in a decisive rupture that breaks the dominance of capitalist class power and ushers in a democratic egalitarian social order. For better or worse, therefore, if we wish to contribute to making such a world possible, the best we can probably do is figure out new interstitial and symbiotic initiatives that build alternatives and solve practical problems, and struggle politically to open up the spaces for these initiatives to be realized.