

# **Erik Olin Wright on the transition to socialism**

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# Contents

<b>Ruptural transition</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Interstitial transition</b> . . . . .	4
<b>Symbiotic transition</b> . . . . .	6
<b>Transitional pluralism</b> . . . . .	7

In his new book *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright suggests that proposals for a what he calls "democratic egalitarian socialism" — and strategies for transition to such a society — should be evaluated "scientifically" — that is, based on evidence and our best understanding of society — and his book attempts to do this.

In what follows I will look only at Wright's discussion of strategies for the transition to democratic, egalitarian socialism.

Wright divides transitional strategies into three types, which he calls *ruptural*, *interstitial*, and *symbiotic*.

## Ruptural transition

In talking about "ruptural" transitions, Wright has in mind the traditional concept of revolution, of a fundamental break with capitalist institutions. For most Marxists historically as well as for anarcho-syndicalists, this was conceived of as arising out of the class struggle.

But Wright completely ignores the syndicalist conception of a ruptural transition, which looks to events such as a mass general strike and widespread worker takeovers of workplaces. This is a major hole in Wright's discussion.

When thinking of *ruptural* strategies, Wright seems to have in mind traditional Leninist conceptions of a revolution. For example, he defines the force for transition as "classes organized into parties." He then defines what he calls "an optimistic scenario" for a "ruptural" transition this way:

"Suppose that a democratic process an emancipatory socialist party were to gain control of the state with a large majority of the vote and had sufficient power to launch a serious program of socialist transformation." And he considers that this "transformation" might be either his preferred solution of market socialism based on thinks like cooperatives and democratization of local government, or it might be "a democratic version of a statist socialist program of state ownership and control of the most important economic organizations."

Wright's scepticism about an "insurrection" against the state in the present era is surely warranted, at least in the more developed capitalist countries. And not only because of the vast armed power of the state. In countries where Communist revolutions were propelled by guerrilla armies in the post-World War 2 era an authoritarian regime emerged in all cases where they "succeeded" and became an instrument of a bureaucratic dominating class.

But Wright isn't thinking about an extra-parliamentary path. He's thinking about an electoral socialist party with a strong commitment to a rapid and totalistic sort of program of change. He thinks it unlikely that such a party would be able to sustain victories in elections long enough to be able to carry this out, given the likely degree of conflict and opposition such a program would invoke.

In particular, Wright emphasizes the likely social costs of the conflict and struggle in such a period, and how this is likely to scare off "middle class" support.

There is, as I see it, another problem to the socialist party path that Wright doesn't consider...the way in which being a successful party undermines commitment to the empowerment

of the working class. The aim of such a party is to implement its program through the hierarchical institutions of the state. An electoral party also tends to focus attention on the individual leaders who are presented for election. Both of these aspects of partyist socialism tend to favor concentration of decision-making authority and expertise into the hands of a few. This is itself the very basis of the class power of the bureaucratic or coordinator class. Liberation of the working class requires that this concentration of authority and expertise be broken down, through democratization of skills and expertise, and by expanding the role of direct, participatory forms of democracy.

Thus the mistake in Wright's conception of a "ruptural" path is that he only thinks in partyist terms. It's true that partyism was always a central feature of Marxism. But there is also the non-partyist alternative of mass movements rooted in the working class. Syndicalism was the main historical example of an extra-parliamentary path to socialism that tried to root this in directly democratic mass worker organizations...as an alternative to the hierarchy and bureaucracy that seem to be an inevitable consequence of the partyist strategy. The syndicalist strategy is especially relevant if you think that direct worker management of workplaces and industries is essential to the liberation of the working class from managerial hierarchies and exploitation.

Although Wright rejects a totalistic rupture with the institutions of capitalist society — at least in the advanced capitalist countries — he doesn't totally reject the idea of rupture:

"Partial ruptures, institutional breaks, and decisive innovations in specific spheres, may be possible, particularly in periods of severe economic crisis. Above all the conception of struggle within ruptural visions — struggle as challenge and confrontation, victories and defeats, rather than just collaborative problem-solving — remains essential for a realistic project of social empowerment."

## **Interstitial transition**

An "interstitial" strategy means building socialism "in the cracks" of capitalism through the development of alternative institutions such as worker and housing cooperatives. Wright thinks of this strategy as largely by-passing the state. Examples of alternative institutions Wright mentions are battered women's shelters, worker coops, community land trusts, community-based social services, and fair trade organizations.

An important figure in the origins of this strategy was Proudhon.

Wright says this is "the anarchist strategy" but Wright is mistaken about this. Here I need to distinguish Proudhon and other individualist anarchists from class struggle-oriented forms of social anarchism, such as anarchosyndicalism. Proudhon is best understood as an early advocate for market socialism. But most social anarchists reject market socialism.

Most social anarchists do support worker cooperatives and other types of alternative institutions within the current society. But most social anarchists conceive of libertarian, self-managed socialism as arising out of mass struggle, in confrontation with the dominating classes and the state, not by building alternative institutions.

Proudhon is not representative of modern social anarchism, which only came together in the first International Working Men's Association (the "first International") in the 1860s-70s, and included figures like Michael Bakunin and Anselmo Lorenzo. In the first International the lib-

ertarian socialists joined with the Marxists to oppose the various proposals of the followers of Proudhon.

Social anarchists support alternative institutions because of their practical value for movements at present and because they illustrate the workability of self-management as a more general solution for society. But most social anarchists do not believe that the power of the capitalists and the institutions of the prevailing system can be overcome simply by building alternative institutions within the cracks of the existing system.

Wright suggests that the advantage to an "interstitial" strategy is that it can develop a rich set of institutions apart from the logic of capitalist exploitation and domination that can sustain people and society through the difficult economic circumstances and conflicts in a period of transition. He conceives of the limits of this strategy as its unwillingness to engage the state, which stands as the main institution that can't be changed or removed by the interstitial strategy. This is Wright's main objection to the interstitial strategy.

I think it rather unlikely that alternative institutions such as cooperatives can become large enough to provide the kind of large-scale social support to avoid the havoc that Wright fears in a period of transition to socialism.

Here again a limit of Wright's discussion is that he completely ignores the syndicalist strategy. He mentions the IWW as endorsing the idea of "building the new society in the shell of the old" but ignores how the IWW actually interpreted that. The IWW did not conceive of a transition to worker-managed socialism in terms of building worker cooperatives. In *The General Strike for Industrial Freedom* — the main IWW statement of their conception of transition — Ralph Chaplin paints a scenario of a "revolutionary general strike on the job" — workers in the various workplaces continuing production under their own control, evicting management from power.

This also addresses somewhat the issue of the state because the syndicalist strategy envisioned a process of mass defection of the personnel in the public sector, not just in private industry. Thus Wright is incorrect when he says that anarchists only envision activity "outside the state." Public sector workers are not "outside the state."

Moreover, if it's a question of how to keep the economy going and meet people's needs in a difficult period of conflict and transition, it seems to me the syndicalist takeover strategy is more plausible than the strategy of building up coops and other alternative institutions... because this alternative sector is unlikely to become large enough to play the role that Wright has in mind.

In saying this, I'm *not* saying we should not also build up alternative institutions. Rather, I am suggesting there are limits to the change in society that can be achieved that way. And it's not just due to the power of the state. Capital's ability to grow through exploitation and the concentrated capitalist domination of many industries means that the alternative sector will tend to be marginalized.

Wright argues that the state isn't just functional for protecting and continuing the system of exploitation and domination but is a more complex institution with a variety of purposes. I agree with him on this point.

I think the state is itself an internally conflicted institution. It's separation from real popular control and hierarchical internal structure and domination of work by managers and top professionals give it the separation from population control that is needed to play its role of defending the interests of the dominating classes.

But the state also must be able to govern, maintain social peace and keep social conflict from getting out of hand, and maintain a semblance of response to popular protest. It needs to be

concerned about the system's legitimacy. And thus the state is the site of compromises with external movements and protests.

The state embodies gains from past struggles and protests and previous concessions to the majority of the population...civil liberties, universal voting in elections, systems of regulation and limits on private power, and systems of benefits such as various public services.

But it seems to me that the more independent a mass movement is, the greater its ability to put pressure on the state to obtain concessions. Thus I don't see how this is an argument for a social-democratic strategy of working within the state hierarchy.

## **Symbiotic transition**

Working through the state in the fashion of social-democratic parties is what Wright calls a *symbiotic* strategy. This is the idea of using the state to incrementally change society in the direction of socialism.

Wright is aware that these parties typically enact reforms that often end up helping capitalism in various ways. Trade union gains, Keynesian economic policies, and the social wage all tend to sustain consumer spending for example, and thus increase the markets that capitalist firms need to make a profit. This is why he calls this strategy "symbiotic." Moreover, social-democratic parties in power also show a tendency over time to identify with the needs of the dominating classes in their countries...they become coopted in various ways.

One limitation of the social-democratic strategy of regulating capital and building up state services is that it leaves capitalist power intact. This power will inevitably be used to counter-attack and take back gains once the balance of power shifts in its favor. The past three decades of the "neo-liberal" tendencies in all the advanced capitalist countries is evidence of this.

Moreover, I disagree that this is a strategy of "social empowerment," as Wright sometimes calls it. Because of the state's hierarchical structure and lack of effective popular control over it, it's hard to see how this is supposed to be a means to "empowerment" of the oppressed and exploited.

Just to take one example, Wright mentions the participatory budgeting process in some Brazilian cities under Workers Party governments, such as the city government in Porto Alegre. This is given as an example of what can be achieved through the "symbiotic" strategy.

The social anarchist groups in these cities have a different perception...they see it as more semblance than reality. In 2003, I interviewed Eduardo, a member of the secretariat of the *Federacao Anarquista Gaucha* in Porto Alegre. FAG is a group of about 60 social anarchists involved in urban land takeovers, union opposition groups and other grassroots organizing. Eduardo told me that the mayor and top city officials can select among the proposals that filter up from the neighborhood assemblies in Porto Alegre. Thus there is no guarantee that the actual allocation of funds will really be set by the priorities decided at the base. And this process covers only 11 percent of the city budget.

The historical trajectory of social-democratic parties does not seem to me to support the idea that this is a plausible transitional strategy towards working class empowerment. The European social-democratic parties have tended to abandon their socialist values and goals in favor of forms of liberalism that accept capitalism as a permanent part of the social landscape. The focus on building a party machine and winning elections inevitably tends to empower the party lead-

ers and political figures. It tends to empower the "middle class" elements in these parties. And politicians tend to favor state control and statist programs because it emphasizes their role.

## Transitional pluralism

Wright advocates what he calls "transitional pluralism", that is, the use of all three of the transitional strategies that he defines — working through electoral politics and the state, building alternative institutions in the cracks of the system, and struggles by mass movements that can make breakthroughs — partial ruptures — in opportune moments.

With the collapse of Communism and the decline of support for Leninism, market socialism has become the preferred program among many socialists — sort of the default program among the Left social-democracy. Cooperatives can be built up incrementally within the existing market framework. Thus mixing electoral party politics and the building of alternative institutions makes sense from a market socialist point of view.

My main criticism here is that I think Wright doesn't seem to sufficiently appreciate the importance of the *independence* of mass movements, from below, in relation to political parties, conservative trade union bureaucracies, and the state. In fact Wright's discussion of the "symbiotic" strategy makes it clear that he is aware of the limitations of this approach. This is why I find it puzzling that he includes it in his conception of "transitional pluralism."

Perhaps there's another way of looking at this. Let's suppose there is a period of heightened mass struggle and growing grassroots organizations, an increasing challenge to "business as usual" under corporate capitalism, and spreading radicalization. In such a period I think it is highly likely that people running for government office will emerge who try to speak to these concerns and enlist support from these sectors of society. There may thus emerge forms of Left political challenge in the electoral arena. Although I don't advocate a strategy of electoral politics and transformation through the state, I think it likely that there will exist such a tendency even if there is also a very strong emphasis on independence in radical working class movements, not tied to electoral politics.

In such a situation I think there may exist both tensions and conflicts and also dialogue and negotiation between the more state-oriented and more independent sections of the Left-oriented movements. We see an example of this today in the relationship between the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and the Workers Party in Brazil. The MST has developed autonomously of the Workers Party. It has its own agenda, developed from below. It has been critical of the Workers Party regime at times, but also does engage in dialogue and negotiation with the Workers Party government.

The revolution in Spain in the '30s was very strongly affected by the dialectical tension between the powerful, highly independent anarchosyndicalist labor movement and the Marxist parties and their union.

A problem with the "Bolivarian" revolution in Venezuela is that there hasn't yet emerged large mass organizations with sufficient independence of Chavez and other government officials and the Chavista political party.

The more powerful the independent mass organizations are, the greater the pressure on the electoral Left. This dialectical tension between an independent mass movement and the political party or governmental Left poses both opportunities and dangers. The danger is cooptation...loss

of independence by the mass organizations. This diminishes their ability to be a means to push for actual empowerment for the oppressed and exploited majority. Advocates for the electoral Left might argue that control of the government by an electoral Left offers the opportunity for greater legitimacy and protection against state violence. On the other hand, control of governments by the left have not prevented military takeover attempts in numerous cases — Spain in 1936, Chile in 1973, to name two.

Because strategic pluralism is inevitable to one degree or another, this makes it rather unlikely that a democratic movement for mass social empowerment will be encapsulated in any single Left political organization's perspective.



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