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Emancipatory social science and anti-oppressive social work: The legacy of Erik Olin Wright

Neil Ballantyne, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The global definition of social work, as articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), states that social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that, amongst other things, promotes the empowerment and liberation of people. The knowledge base for social work has a rich history of different theoretical perspectives, frameworks and practice models, some of which directly address aspects of human oppression, discrimination and marginalisation. These approaches can be grouped under the umbrella term of *anti-oppressive practice* and include anti-discriminatory practice, anti-racist practice, feminist, green and Marxist perspectives.

APPROACH: This paper draws on the work of the US analytical Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright to consider how his concept of *emancipatory social science* might be applied in the context of anti-oppressive social work. The article will focus primarily on a close reading of two of Wright's publications—*Envisioning Real Utopias* and *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the 21st Century*—exploring their implications for anti-oppressive practice.

CONCLUSIONS: Wright's concept of emancipatory social science, along with his ideas about social empowerment and building real utopias, are not well known in the social work literature. The framework offers a valuable complement to existing anti-oppressive social work practice. Its open, flexible, and adaptable nature is inclusive of different political traditions and cultural contexts, including Indigenous perspectives. In these challenging times, emancipatory social science provides a rallying point, a tūrangawaewae (common ground) on which diverse social groups can connect and work collectively to craft real utopias.

Keywords: Anti-capitalism, anti-oppressive practice, Marxism, emancipation

The call for abstracts for this special issue invited reflections on the impact of Aotearoa New Zealand's current coalition government—known locally as the three-headed taniwha (Spinoff, 2024)—and ideas for projects of resistance and frameworks that might help counter the renewed neoliberal assault on progressive change.

At the time of writing, the coalition government's actions include the unravelling of legislation to protect workers' rights (RNZ, 2023), offering billions of dollars in tax refunds to landlords (Coughlan, 2024), cutting thousands of jobs in the public sector (Sowman-Lund, 2024) and a number of measures to dilute the already lukewarm

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Neil Ballantyne
neil.ballantyne@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

commitment of previous governments to decolonisation and recognition of *tino rangatiratanga* for Māori (Smale, 2024). As David Harvey has argued, the neoliberal project has always been concerned with "the restoration of class power" (Harvey, 2007, p. 16) and, in the context of Aotearoa, we can add to that the reassertion of settler colonial power.

The call for abstracts resonated with my reflections on recent reading undertaken as part of a project on data justice, where I encountered the uses of Erik Olin Wright's ideas by researchers at the Data Justice Lab at the University of Cardiff in the UK. I was interested in how the Data Justice Lab framed the idea of data justice and how this framing informed their practice as a research centre. Amongst the many ideas utilised by Lina Dencik (co-director of the Data Justice Lab) was Wright's (2010) thinking around what he described as *emancipatory social science*. The details of emancipatory social science were laid out in *Envisioning Real Utopias,* but this text was built on an earlier project (https://www.realutopiasproject.com) that he and his colleagues had worked on since the early 1990s. Wright (2019) later summarised *Envisioning Real Utopias* in a more accessible text aimed at social movement activists entitled *How to be an Anticapitalist in the 20th Century*. Examining how the Data Justice Lab embedded this framework in their research (Dencik, 2022) led me to wonder how these ideas might translate into the context of anti-oppressive social work practice, and that, in a nutshell, is what this article aims to do.

In one sense, this article is nothing more than a reflective review of some key ideas from the two texts (Wright, 2010, 2019) where I explain emancipatory social science and the idea of real utopias but also reflect critically on how Wright's ideas might be mobilised in the context of the preexisting progressive social work frameworks associated with anti-oppressive practice. I am using anti-oppressive practice as an umbrella term—following Baines and Clark (2022)—for a number of social justice oriented frameworks including approaches such as feminist, Indigenous, anti-racist and critical perspecitves. However, before offering an account of Wright's (2010, 2019) perspective, I want to set the scene by reflecting on the relevance of emancipation and empowerment to social work practice.

Emancipation, empowerment and social work

The global definition of social work, as articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), states that social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that, amongst other things, "promotes the empowerment and liberation of people" (IFSW, 2014). That is the explicit statement, but this is founded on the assumption that people, or at least some social groups, are dominated and oppressed. The term *emancipation* is not featured in the global definition, although it is implicit and is referred to directly in the commentary notes that expand the definition. In the notes, the term emancipation (IFSW, 2014) appears in the section on *core mandates.* One of the core mandates is described as:

> The development of critical consciousness through reflecting on structural sources of oppression and/or privilege … and developing action strategies towards addressing structural and personal barriers are central to *emancipatory practice* [emphasis added] where the goals are the empowerment and liberation of people.

Notice that this paragraph has a focus on the social worker's role in "the development of critical consciousness" (discussed further below) and "action strategies towards addressing *structural* and *personal* barriers [emphasis added]". Also, in the section on *knowledge*:

> The uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are *applied and emancipatory* [emphasis added].

And again, in the section on *practice*:

> From an *emancipatory perspective* [emphasis added] … this definition supports social work strategies … aimed at increasing people's hope, self-esteem and creative potential to confront and challenge oppressive power dynamics and structural sources of injustices…

These statements are made at a high level, and we know that the generation of the global definition was controversial and contested. It led to many debates about the nature of global social work (Gray & Webb, 2008; Jones, 2024) and the complete redrafting of an earlier version of the definition (Ioakimidis, 2013). We also know that there are multiple and contested meanings of the term *empowerment* in social work practice, from those aimed at micro-level practices addressing issues of social skills and self-esteem to more policy-level and political forms of practice (see Rivest & Moreau, 2015, for a helpful review). Rivest and Moreau (2015), for example, critiqued the concept of individual empowerment and highlighted how it channels depoliticised and socially normative concepts of "independence, personal initiative and responsibility" (p. 1965).

This is not to suggest that practices that empower individual people, especially members of historically marginalised and oppressed social groups, are not an important part of the repertoire of social work practice. Individual members of marginalised and oppressed social groups can (and should) be supported to surmount negative self-evaluations and contextualise their lived experience of societal discrimination and prejudice as sources of stigma rather than negative inner traits or personal failings. Personal empowerment, in this sense, can help address important issues of self-stigmatisation (Brohan et al., 2011; Parkinson et al., 2021). The ideas of restorying, or counterstorying, are key components of contemporary anti-oppressive practice, or what has been described as *critical clinical social work* (Brown & MacDonald, 2020). For many scholars, especially those in the Freirian and feminist traditions, individual empowerment is a form of consciousness-raising intended to establish that "the personal is political" (Freire, 1970; Hanisch, 1970) and is a necessary precursor of social action aimed at societal transformation (Rivest & Moreau, 2015).

While this connection between consciousness-raising and social action is evident in the practices of historical and contemporary social movements—such as the movements for Black, women's and transgender liberation—the connection is less obvious in the practice of mainstream social workers and their employing agencies where uses of power and empowerment are more firmly focussed on immediate individual and family dynamics (Tew, 2006). In this latter context, "the accent in practice remains on the individual dimensions of empowerment" (Rivest & Moreau, 2015, p. 1864).

We should also acknowledge that some uses of the concept of empowerment in mainstream social work practice strip out the context of oppression and marginalisation entirely. As Baines and Clark (2022) put it, "[a]lthough often claiming otherwise, mainstream social work tends to view social problems in a depoliticized way that emphasizes individual shortcomings, pathology and inadequacy" (p. 24). In this mainstream context—under the influence of over 30 years of neoliberal ideology and organisational cultures based on managerialism (Garrett, 2019)—empowerment may be used to refer to efforts to engage the motivation and agency of a service user to meet their responsibilities for achieving personal change (in their roles as parent, carer, beneficiary, tenant, patient and so on) without reference to class exploitation, racism, sexism, or other structural issues. Commenting on the influence of neoliberalism on social work in the UK, Rogowski (2012) stated, "We have witnessed a move from a collectivist welfare state to a

competitive individualist society in which everyone takes responsibility for themselves. If individuals cannot do this, they are increasingly dealt with in authoritarian ways" (p. 32). As Rivest and Moreau (2015) argued, in some contexts, the "emancipatory project of empowerment" has become depoliticised and transformed into "an individualised project of self-actualisation" (p. 1866). If this analysis is correct, then, as currently constituted, mainstream social work (at least in Western anglophone countries) does not refer to emancipatory or empowering practices in ways intended by the IFSW (2014) definition. That is, they are not defined in terms of the development of *critical consciousness* or *action strategies* but are instead, if the terms are used at all, deployed in more individualised and responsibilised forms (Liebenberg et al., 2013).

When Erik Olin Wright uses the terms *emancipatory social science* and *social empowerment*, his meanings are closer to the intentions of the IFSW and align closely with the principles of anti-oppressive practice. Let us now turn to Erik Olin Wright and the subject of emancipatory social science before reflecting on what this way of thinking might contribute to the anti-oppressive traditions within social work practice.

Who was Erik Olin Wright?

Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019) was, until his untimely death in 2019, a professor of sociology and an analytical Marxist based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the USA. For many years, he established a reputation for modernising Marxist theory and maintaining its contemporary relevance by revising the core concepts of social class, inequality and democracy. During the first two decades of his career, from the 1970s to the 1980s, he focused on reconstructing Marxism, particularly its framework for the analysis of class (Wright, 2023). Later, from the 1990s onwards, he turned his attention to "the theme of utopia and emancipatory transformation" (Wright, 2010, p. x) and did so at a time when the world seemed to be moving in the opposite direction—when the Berlin Wall had fallen, neoliberalism was on the ascendant and the "end of history" was prematurely announced (Fukuyama, 1992).

This historical conjuncture had a deep influence on Wright's work. He had no interest in defending failed authoritarian socialist states but wanted to revitalise and modernise Marxist theory in a project grounded in democratic socialist values. In a project titled *The Real Utopias Project,* Wright (2010, 2019) advocated a pragmatic approach to achieving real-world changes in social institutions that might promote social empowerment and lead to emancipatory practices. By conjoining the words *real* and *utopia,* Wright signalled the core purpose of the project, described on its website in the following way:

> The Real Utopias Project embraces a tension between dreams and practice. It is founded on the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. The fulfillment of such a belief involves "real utopias" – utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials for redesigning social institutions. (Real Utopias Project, n.d.)

Although Wright never used the term himself, we might—following Dencik (2018)—consider the project akin to developing alternative *social and political imaginaries* (Castoriadis, 1987; Ricoeur, 1986; C. Taylor, 2004) that challenge the taken-for-granted idea that neoliberal capitalism and its existing social institutions were somehow natural and inevitable. The project's intention was not to design detailed blueprints for a socialist future. Wright agreed with Karl Marx that designing blueprints was a pointless exercise in fantasy. Rather, Wright (2010) and the many people who became involved with the Real Utopias Project wanted to achieve "a clear elaboration of workable institutional principles that could inform emancipatory alternatives to the existing world" (p. x).

Envisioning real utopias

For our present purposes, it is important to note that Erik Olin Wright did not set out to articulate a model of social work practice, nor does he make any reference to social work. However, he does repeatedly refer to emancipation, social empowerment, poverty, inequality, social justice, social change, and the kinds of policies and practices that support human flourishing (a concept that resonates strongly with the idea of *thrivance* proposed by Indigenous scholars (Baumann, 2023)). His primary focus was on strategies for developing non-capitalist and anti-capitalist institutions that support social empowerment. Importantly, he also referred to the kinds of non-capitalist organisational forms that might be used to support individuals and families and offer community-based care, including childcare and care for older people (Wright, 2010, 2019).

Wright (2010) opens *Envisioning Real Utopias*, by laying out a pragmatic approach to building an emancipatory social science. He began with a focused and distinct definition of emancipatory social science:

> The word *emancipatory* identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing. And the word *social* implies the belief that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner life of persons. (Wright, 2010, p. 10)

As Masquelier (2019) stated, Wright constructed emancipatory social science "around three main axes: a diagnosis of capitalism, a look at some alternatives to capitalism and a theory of transformation … Wright wished to show the reader why a socialist alternative is not only desirable but also something achievable". As Wright (2010) put it, the tasks of emancipatory social science were to:

- elaborate a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists;
- envision viable alternatives; and
- understand the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation.

In different places and at different historical conjunctures, one or another of these three tasks may be more pressing than the others, "but all are necessary for a comprehensive emancipatory theory" (Wright, 2010, p. 10). The first task of diagnosis and critique is the starting point and involves assessing:

> … ways in which existing social institutions and social structures systematically impose harms on people. It is not enough to show that people are suffering or that there are enormous inequalities in the extent to which people may live flourishing lives. A scientific emancipatory theory must show that the explanation for such suffering and inequality lies in specific properties of institutions and social structures. The first task of emancipatory social science, therefore, is the diagnosis and critique of the causal processes that generate these harms. (Wright, 2010, p. 11)

Diagnosing social harms

The idea of diagnosing social harms is not new. This is familiar territory for social work practitioners and researchers, and there is an emerging sociological sub-field called *zemiology* dedicated to conceptualising and studying structural social harms (Boukli & Kotzé, 2018; Canning & Tombs, 2021). Wright (2010, 2019) acknowledged that diagnosis and critique are standard practice in a wide range of anti-oppressive movements, including feminist, anti-racist, green, and labour movements. Across the social sciences, it is widely acknowledged that social harms—including, for example, physical and mental health conditions (Murali & Oyebode, 2004), crime rates (De Courson & Nettle, 2021), and the prevalence of child maltreatment

(Hunter & Flores, 2021)—are strongly associated with poverty and inequality. Wilkinson and Picket (2010) provided convincing international, empirical evidence of the consistent correlation between income inequality and a host of negative health and social outcomes. Poverty and inequality are often described as being amongst the key *social determinants* of harmful health and social outcomes (Te Whatu Ora, 2024; World Health Organisation, 2024) and strategies have been proposed by successive governments to tackle specific outcomes such as child poverty, health inequity, child maltreatment and homelessness.

However, if we consider, as Wright (2010, 2019) does, that many of these social harms are tied to the routine operation of the capitalist mode of production, then solutions require more than specific policy initiatives targeted at achieving particular social and health outcomes. An outcome-focused approach that ignores the need for systemic social and economic change cannot hope to alter the reality of ongoing oppression and marginalisation. As Ioakimidis (2013) argued, "neoliberal capitalism, a brutal system based on exploitation and unequal distribution of resources, is responsible for most of the causes pushing people to interact—voluntarily or involuntarily—with social services" (Ioakimidis, 2013, p. 185). Mirroring our earlier discussion about mainstream social work, Ioakimidis (2013) also contended that "much of mainstream social work has turned a blind eye towards this reality" and that "pathologisation, stigmatisation and surveillance have been the norm rather than the exception in much of the history of top-down welfare" (p. 186).

Not all social harms can be laid at the door of the capitalist system. Wright (2010) acknowledged that there are other social dynamics at play "such as racism, sexism, war, religious fundamentalism, homophobia and so on" (p. 38). These other forms of oppression and domination—and their interlocking, intersectional impacts—are recognised within emancipatory social science as much as they were in the statement of the Combahee River Collective (Taylor, 2017). Diagnosing social harm is the first task of emancipatory social science, but the value of the framework is that it does not stop there. Put simply, as Karl Marx wrote, "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx, 1845). The next two tasks focus on social change by envisioning viable alternatives to the present predicament and then planning steps towards achieving transformational changes.

Significantly, these steps are not focussed on a complete ruptural transformation of the social order but on changes in social institutions that offer practical, tangible movements towards social empowerment. Although the examples offered by Wright (2010, 2019) foreground changes in economic structures—such as the creation of workers' cooperatives, economic democracy and building the solidarity economy—his conceptual framework for social transformation is equally valid in the context of social service institutions including education, health and social work institutions.

Before outlining the next two tasks of emancipatory social science, Wright (2010, 2019) sought to ground diagnosis and critique in two normative principles concerned with social and political justice. He considered this necessary because "[t]o describe a social arrangement as generating 'harms' is to infuse the analysis with a moral judgement" (Wright, 2010, p. 12). Wright (2010) delineated two broad normative principles, one concerning *social justice* focusing on the conditions for human flourishing and the second on *political justice* highlighting conditions for freedom and democracy. Later Wright (2019), expressed these two principles in the form of three clusters of values defined as follows:

- *Equality/Fairness*: In a just society, all persons would have broadly equal access to the material and social means necessary to live a flourishing life (p.10)
- *Democracy/Freedom*: In a fully democratic society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things that affect their lives (p. 15)
- *Community/Solidarity*: Expresses the principle that people ought to cooperate with each other not simply because of what they personally receive but also from a real commitment to the wellbeing of others and a sense of moral obligation that it is right to do so. (p.18)

It is worth noting that the first cluster concerns both the material *distribution*, or redistribution, of resources (for example, food, shelter, clothing, health and social services); and the *social* recognition of status and identity (ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and so on). The second cluster concerns *participation*, especially in decisions about matters that affect our lives. For Wright (2010, 2019), this included workplace democracy and civil society fora like citizen assemblies, but it pertains equally to service user involvement in social service decision-making. The third acknowledges the inherent value of human solidarity, community and collectivism. It is difficult to imagine that even mainstream social work agencies would object to these values or that social workers would not acknowledge that their service users would not benefit from social policies and practices that enact them. The code of ethics of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW, 2019), for example, includes the core value of *kotahitanga* (solidarity) with the implication that:

> Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all its forms, including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. (ANZASW, 2019, p. 12)

These values are critical for emancipatory social science; in part because they delineate the moral positioning of the good, making it possible to articulate the bad, and diagnose social harms. But they are also critical because, in the final chapter of Wright (2019) we learn that when it comes to identifying the *agents of transformation*, or those key actors who can be mobilised to create real utopias, the three values become a rallying point, a collective tūrangawaewae (place to stand) beyond the different identity formations and separate interests of different social groups. As Wright (2019) put it:

> The discussion of values should be at the very centre of progressive politics. The three clusters of values ... should be made explicitly and explained. Discussions of values, of course, can become high-sounding but empty window dressing. It is important to emphasize how these values relate to concrete policies that advance radical economic democracy. (p. 142)

Envisioning viable alternatives

The second task of emancipatory social science involves envisioning viable alternatives. Wright (2010) carefully distinguished his vision of viable democratic socialist alternatives from Soviet-style state socialism. He argued for a socialism that takes the *social* seriously and differentiated *statism* (state control of the means of production and resource allocation) from *democratic socialism* (or social ownership of the means of production and allocation). His definition of socialism is rooted in *social power* or democratic control where:

> … the idea of "democracy" … can be thought of as a specific way of linking social power and state power: in the ideal of democracy, state power is fully subordinated to and accountable to social power … 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. (Wright, 2010, p. 121)

This is what Wright meant by *social empowerment*: the subordination of state power and economic power to social power rooted in civil society. The emphasis is on empowerment at the macro and mezzo levels of society, although changes at these levels are anticipated to impact micro-level changes in social relations. To fully understand the complexity and subtlety of his argument, we need to grasp two key ideas. Firstly, each society, at different places and points in time, can be characterised by the current balance between three different spheres of social interaction and their respective forms of power: *state power*, *economic power* and *social power*. Secondly, these three spheres of social interaction are in dynamic interplay. Every human society can be considered to be a *hybrid* ecosystem (Wright, 2010, 2019) in relation to the respective influence of each sphere.

According to Wright (2010, 2019) the three spheres of social interaction are the state, the economy and civil society:

- *The state* consists of institutions empowered to impose administrative rules and regulations on citizens of a territory. *State power* lies in the capacity of state actors to impose those rules through the routine operation of governance, control of information and communications, ideological influence over citizens, and, when necessary, the use of coercion, force and the judicial system.
- *The economy* is the sphere of the market where citizens interact to produce, distribute and procure goods and services. *Economic power* is based on distributing, deploying and controlling economic resources. The massively asymmetric control of economic power by privately owned firms is characteristic of the distribution of economic power in states where the capitalist mode of production is dominant.
- *Civil society* is the sphere where citizens voluntarily engage in different kinds of association, from loose, affiliative social networks to more highly structured organisations, including churches, trade unions and political parties. Civil society organisations can be said to have *social power* when they have the capacity to take collective action for social change. The expansion of social power and civil society engagement in running social institutions is at the heart of Wright's vision for social transformation.

As mentioned above, the notion of hybridity is of central importance to Wright's thinking about alternatives to capitalism and to his thinking about theories of transformation. Societal change, on this view, is not an all-or-nothing, zero-sum game but one where the balance of forces can shift towards more or less progressive forms depending on the balance of power between the civil society, the state and the market, "[t]reating these concepts as varying in degree opens the possibility of complex mixed cases—*hybrids* in which an economy is capitalist in certain respects and in others statist or socialist" (Wright, 2010, p. 124). Wright discussed the myriad ways civil society can exercise social power, influence and control over the state and the economy. He cites several living examples of real utopias or the practical implementation of ideas for redesigning social institutions, including participatory city budgeting, open-source software design, workers' cooperatives and the solidarity economy.

Achieving transformational change

From diagnosing social harms to exploring viable alternatives, emancipatory social science leads to an appreciation of achievable pathways towards transformational, socially empowering change. Understanding the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation is an essential prerequisite to creating and sustaining progressive institutional changes and nudging society towards democratic socialism. Wright (2010) identified three broad and familiar strategies

for transformational change (associated with three established political traditions). First is the familiar classical Marxist view of revolutionary or ruptural transformation associated with the revolutionary socialist tradition. This is contrasted with two types of gradual metamorphosis towards a democratic socialist future. Of the two gradualist transformations, Wright (2010) describes one as *interstitial transformation*—associated with the bottom-up anarchist tradition—where civil society actors develop alternative institutions in the "spaces and the cracks within some dominant social structure of power" (p. 322). The second gradualist transformation is entitled *symbiotic transformation*, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between political elites and the working class where compromise is in the interests of both. The classic example is the post-World War II *class compromise* when top-down, social democratic governments introduced regulations to mitigate the harms of the free market and measures of social protection in the form of the welfare state.

In Wright (2019), the three typologies of transformational change were revisited and expanded, and the nomenclature was altered for his intended activist audience. This time he delineates five different "strategic logics" for the anticapitalist struggle. In addition, Wright argued that these strategic logics are not mutually exclusive and that four of them can be combined in an approach described as *eroding capitalism* that "offers the most plausible strategic vision for transcending capitalism in the twenty-first century" (Wright, 2019, p. 38). Wright (2019) called the five strategic logics: *smashing capitalism*; *dismantling capitalism*; *taming capitalism; resisting capitalism*; and *escaping capitalism*. He considers that the first is an unlikely pathway for high-income capitalist countries but that the last four can be used in combination to erode and undermine capitalist logic. These last four strategic logics are evident in contemporary social movements and are recognisable in the literature on anti-oppressive social work practice (see, for example Baines et al. (2022) and Shaikh et al. (2022)).

Smashing capitalism

Smashing capitalism maps onto Wright's (2010) earlier concept of ruptural transformation. It aims to overthrow the capitalist system in a decisive ruptural moment where the people seize state power. Wright (2019) argued that—given its tendencies towards contradictions and recurrent crises—a radical rupture is not impossible in high-income, liberal democracies but is an unlikely prospect in the 21st century. Also, if it did occur, it would be vulnerable to takeover by anti-democratic forces in ways that lead to state-based authoritarian solutions (of the left or the right) rather than a deeply democratic form of social empowerment. As Wright (2109) put it, "[v]isions that resonate with anger are not enough; what is needed is a strategic logic that has some chance of working in practice" (p. 42). He reframes smashing capitalism as a long-term goal, a final outcome that provides a vision for the ultimate transformation of society. In the meantime, according to Wright (2019), the other four strategic logics can work in combination towards creating the conditions necessary for such a revolutionary change.

Dismantling capitalism

Dismantling capitalism is one aspect of the state-directed strategy of symbiotic transformation referred to in Wright (2010). It involves gradually installing elements of democratic socialism from above through state-directed reforms that progressively replace capitalist structures with democratic socialist ones. The aim is to change the rules of the capitalist game, open up space for emancipatory alternatives and lay the foundations for a transition towards socialism. Crucially this strategy depends on the existence of political parties with socially progressive policies. There are few 21st-century social democratic parties that

adopt this logic, but one exception was the radical policy proposal on "Alternative Models of Ownership" proposed by the British Labour Party in 2017 under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn (Labour Party, 2017; *New Socialist*, 2017; Rozoworski, 2017). This policy proposal advocated for a combination of support for workers' cooperatives, municipal socialism and selective nationalisation of infrastructure. Of course, progressive political parties also require popular electoral support to survive the inevitable onslaught of opposition to their policies from powerful political elites. In spite of a dramatic surge in popular support for the Labour Party after Corbyn was nominated as the leadership candidate (Whiteley et al., 2019), the media campaign mounted against Corbyn, and the emerging issue of Brexit assured his electoral defeat in 2019 (Gough, 2020).

Taming capitalism

If dismantling capitalism is one aspect of the state-directed strategy of symbiotic transformation, taming capitalism is the other. This strategic logic seeks to minimise the harms of capitalism by implementing regulations, measures of redistribution and reforms that mitigate its negative impacts without undermining its existence, making life more tolerable within the capitalist framework. Actions might include progressive taxation policies, labour market regulations, health and safety legislation, support for trade union rights and collective bargaining, rent controls, public sector housing, welfare benefits, providing comprehensive state-funded health and social services and so on. As Wright (2019) put it, "The idea of taming capitalism does not eliminate the underlying tendency for capitalism to cause harm; it simply counteracts that effect" (p. 45). Countering this strategic logic was the main objective of neoliberalism in the 1980s with the dismantling of welfare provision, privatisation of services, regressive cuts in taxation and a drive to deregulate capitalist dynamics (Harvey, 2007). The trend continues to be evident in the policies of mainstream parties that remain under the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideas, parties such as those that comprise the current Aotearoa New Zealand coalition government, who are more interested in unleashing capitalism than in taming it. Publically funded health and social service agencies also exist as part of the strategic logic to tame capitalism by ensuring the social reproduction of labour (Bhattacharya, 2017). These services—whether run by the state or NGOs—continue to be at the forefront of the struggle.

Resisting capitalism

For Wright (2019), resisting capitalism is a term used "to identify struggles that oppose capitalism from outside the state but do not themselves attempt to gain state power" (p. 49). Resisting capitalism is related to Wright's (2010) concept of interstitial transformation involving civil society, social movements and activists using direct action and mobilisations, such as protests and occupations, to highlight, confront and block the depredations of capitalism and pro-capitalist governments. This is often the driving force for labour, trade unions, and social movements and is very evident in the current series of mobilisations against the current coalition government of Aotearoa New Zealand. These forms of resistance can bring matters to the attention of the public that political elites would rather ignore, they politicise issues by making them public. They are often concerned with fair pay, working conditions, social and economic justice, environmental justice, human rights, Indigenous rights, democracy and fairness. Social movements are not solely anticapitalist in nature but mobilise on a wide range of related, intersectional issues campaigning for Indigenous rights, redistribution, status recognition and wider participation (Fraser, 1998; Young, 2022). Once again, these ideas resonate strongly with accounts of anti-oppressive practice that connect social work practice to social movements and activism (Baines & Sauer, 2022).

Escaping capitalism

Escaping capitalism is a strategic logic related to interstitial transformation (Wright, 2010) and focuses on creating alternative spaces of economic activity and relations within—but outside—the capitalist system, such as workers' cooperatives, peer-to-peer production and promoting the social and solidarity economy. These initiatives can serve as practical examples of viable alternatives to capitalism, demonstrating that other ways of organising economic and social life are possible. Forms of mutual aid have always been part of the labour movement, as have cooperatives, and, although far from mainstream, there are some stunning modern success stories, such as the Mondragon Federation in Spain, which operates workers' owned cooperative companies, including a cooperative university (Romeo, 2022; The Young Foundation, 2017). Wright (2019) argued that escaping capitalism is not about individual lifestyle choices but can include genuine experiments in anticapitalist workplace organisational forms that prefigure alternative ways of arranging economic activity and providing services (Monticelli, 2022). The journal you are reading is a good example of an attempt to produce and distribute social work knowledge outside of the ambit of capitalist publishing houses. It is part of the open-source movement, run by an editorial collective and supported by a social work professional organisation (Ballantyne, 2022; Gair et al., 2020). There are several international examples of workers' cooperatives in the caring economy (McMullen et al., 2024) and, in Aotearoa New Zealand, a vibrant, if underfunded, programme of health and social services is organised by Iwi-led organisations (Kawiti-Bishara, 2023).

Eroding capitalism

The five strategic logics described by Wright (2019) are not unfamiliar to any social movement activist or student of political change. Historically, they have often been associated with separate and competing political traditions: social revolutionary, social democratic and anarchist. What is refreshing about Wright's (2019) perspective is his use of the idea of society as an open, hybrid, indeterminate ecosystem. In that context, alliances between social movements and other actors, including social workers committed to anti-oppressive practice, become pivotal as agents of transformational change. Wright (2019) argued that contemporary social movements were beginning to embrace and argue for top-down democratic socialist, state-directed attempts to dismantle and tame capitalism while encouraging bottom-up, civil society efforts to resist neoliberalism and escape capitalism by creating alternative, prefigurative economic structures.

In Aotearoa New Zealand today, our social fabric is being ravaged by a coalition government with far-right elements intent on rolling back the small progressive steps made by previous centre-left governments. However, we are also experiencing significant popular resistance to those regressive measures and a leftward shift in minority parties who are not to be ruled out in a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting system. For example, Te Pati Māori is committed to a programme of prison abolition by 2040 (Neilson, 2023) and the Green Party currently advocate for a form of unconditional basic income (Radio New Zealand, 2023), a measure supported by Wright (2010, 2019) as a type of non-reformist reform (Engler & Engler, 2021). The vision of emancipatory social science articulated by Wright (2010, 2019) offers social movements and coalitions of collective actors a multifaceted approach to eroding capitalism, unravelling it one institution at a time. Civil society actors resisting and escaping capitalism can build grassroots support and demonstrate the feasibility of alternatives. Progressive political parties can tame and dismantle capitalism by creating the institutional and regulatory frameworks required to sustain these alternatives.

Emancipatory social science for anti-oppressive practice?

My primary purpose in writing this article was to introduce the legacy of Erik Olin Wright to a community of practitioners who seem unlikely to be aware of the value of his work. Despite his eminent reputation in international sociological circles—and the fact that he visited the University of Otago—he is seldom cited in social work journals in Aotearoa New Zealand or elsewhere. And yet, as a framework for thinking about social change, emancipatory social science aligns well with existing perspectives on anti-oppressive social work. It also adds a much more open and dynamic dimension of Marxist theory for social work (de Montigny, 2022; Garrett, 2022; Pike & Vickers, 2022). The openness of the framework to adaptation is illustrated in one of the modifications proposed by Lina Dencik of the Data Justice Lab. She argued for the use of emancipatory social science to diagnose the harms arising from datafication but insisted that this diagnosis should not be top-down but—informed by feminist theory and sensibilities (Kalsem & Williams, 2010; Young, 2022)—must directly involve those impacted by the harms done, putting the lived experiences of marginalised social groups at the centre of our concern (Dencik, 2019). Although Wright makes no specific reference to bottom-up approaches to diagnosing social harm, his commitment to social empowerment, deep democracy, and participatory approaches to governance align well with such a commitment, as do the values of emancipatory social science outlined above. This is important because, as Baines and Clark (2022) have argued, participatory approaches to work with service users and communities are a key aspect of anti-oppressive social work practice.

A more fundamental challenge to emancipatory social science might emanate from scholars committed to decolonisation. How relevant is a framework, developed primarily by Western social theorists, to the lives, aspirations and emancipation of Indigenous peoples? And if it has no relevance, we should not be advocating its use in the context of anti-oppressive social work. I am happy to report that the adaptability of Wright's framework has been recognised by at least one Indigenous scholar in Aotearoa New Zealand. In an article entitled "A socialist compass for Aotearoa: Envisioning Māori socialism", Danielle Webb (2019) adapts Wright's (2010) three forms of power—state power, economic power and social power—that he described as three points on a compass for achieving socialism (Wright, 2006). To this compass, Webb (2019) added a fourth point, *tino rangatiratanga* or Māori self-determination. As Webb (2019) put it:

> … there is a major problem with Wright's compass: it only has three points (state power, economic power, and social power). I extend Wright's vision for socialism by completing the compass, adding to it a much needed fourth point: tino rangatiratanga. The resulting "Aotearoa socialist compass" can be used to orient us towards Māori socialism—a socialist economy in which tino rangatiratanga is realised. (p. 72)

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this article has not been to offer emancipatory social science as a fully fledged model of social work practice. It was never intended to fulfil that role. However, it resonates well with the broad range of tendencies—Indigenous, feminist, socialist, anarchist and others—associated with anti-oppressive practice. In addition, because of its adaptability, openness and encouragement of collective experimentation it offers activists, progressive politicians and anti-oppressive social workers, a tūrangawaewae (common ground) on which to stand and work collectively to craft real utopias. As Wright (2012) said:

> The framework rejects the arrogance of "there is one best way" and encourages activists to embrace experimentation and openness. This probably will not appeal to people for whom inspiration requires dogmatic certainties, but I think it may provide a matrix of ideas that bolster the pragmatic enthusiasm of many activists and social movements. (p. 403)

Audre Lorde offered the provocative warning, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Perhaps Erik Olin Wright's legacy is to bequeath to us a toolkit we can use in combination with other tools to fashion a new house.

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