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## An Elegy to Utopia

An Analysis of Erik Olin Wrights' *Envisioning Real Utopias*

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## **Abstract**

Erik Olin Wright has written a book called *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), concerning the idea of exactly that: real utopias. This study has two goals: First, analysing Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) with the intent to see how he positions himself within the framework of postmodern theory regarding grand narratives. This paper concludes that he does not propose a grand narrative.

Second, the paper will discuss the usefulness of postmodern critique of grand narratives and utopian thinking, and if the utopian project might have more value in modern political theory than certain critics seems to think. There will be applied theory from relevant thinkers within the postmodern tradition and utopian thinking, from early socialism and until today. Postmodernists are inherently negative to the grand narrative tradition and sees utopian thinking as something archaic, but this paper will argue that there still room in modern political theory for this line of thinking.



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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Is utopia possible? Alternatively, is there a place for utopias in modern day political theory? In his 2010 work *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Erik Olin Wright proposes the concept of *real utopias*, which is an attempt to translate the idea of utopia into something practical, fitting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Fittingly, this year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event that for some signalled the end of the great battle of ideologies. The west was to stand triumphant, and western liberal democracy was the last man standing. It was the end of history (Fukuyama 1989: 1). This is of course only one side of the argument.

The argument against established institutions and the ingrained capitalist system is still as topical as ever, the world having experienced one of the worst economic crises since the Great Depression, there is no lack of things to point one's finger at. This is where Wright enters. Seeing faults with the current system, he sets out to identify these errors and to establish an alternative for system organisation, one that focuses on social emancipation. Wright positions himself within the Marxist tradition, and his critique of the capitalist system builds upon familiar groundwork. What sets him apart is his attempt to identify these real utopias, and how they can help to propel social change, giving his political theory a practical application. The importance of keeping things within the realm of reality is to distinguish his theory from what is traditionally known as *grand narratives*, or as Wright calls it: *grand designs* (Wright 2010: x), a concept often associated with (as we shall see) with an outdated worldview by postmodernists.

### 1.1 Objective

This paper is a study of *Envisioning Real Utopias* by Erik Olin Wright (2010), where the main focus is to juxtapose Wright's theories up against that of grand narratives and postmodernist critique of grand narratives. Wright's work is an attempt at defining what he calls real utopias and, while at the same time looking at ways of social transformation to shift the current capitalist system towards a socialist one based on social emancipation. The analysis will compare Wright's theories to postmodernist principles, and will also include a section on the necessity of utopia, which will discuss the role of utopian thinking what by some have dubbed a late-capitalist society (Levitas 2000). My research questions then become:



1. Does Erik Olin Wright propose a grand narrative in *Envisioning Real Utopias*?
2. Is postmodern theory useful when discussing Erik Olin Wright and utopian thinking?

### **1.1.1 Why does it matter?**

One might ask why this paper is analysing Wright's position viewed against the backdrop of grand narrative theory. Postmodernists hold that grand narratives assume greater importance than should be. They seem to think that grand narrative theory is close to a doomsday prophecy, in danger of propelling mankind into a new totalitarian project. At the same time, postmodernism might be accused of working in favour of the capitalist system, obfuscating the world until mankind loses the view of what is important and the brutality and efficiency of capitalism fragments us until we no longer can focus enough to organise some sort of resistance. Perhaps because of this, it is even more important that Wright does not take on the role of some sort of saving prophet, one who stands so far above the rest as to only cause more alienation to the people who needs to play a role in an emancipation. If Wright can make his theories and suggestions simple enough for people to comprehend, and that at the same time conforms to the fragmentation of modern society, then they can make a difference. Perhaps the time for grand philosophies of change is over, and to be able to make it through the white noise of modern society we have to look towards theories that start on the ground, ones in which the people themselves can play a part and which takes a sober approach to the act of radical change.

"Utopia's value lies not in its relation to present practice, but in its relation to a possible future" (Kumar 1991: 3). The search for a better future has occupied us for as long as there has been sentient thought amongst us. Ever since explorers set sails to find new land and then looked to the moon, the everlasting longing for something else has been an inherent part of the human condition.

The aim of this paper is to see if the theory proposed by Erik Olin Wright circumvents the problems of grand narratives as seen by postmodernists, considering their animosity to what Wright calls 'ruptural transformation' (i.e. old-fashioned revolution). For Wright, the wish is to develop strategies that focus on paths of transformation that preserves democratic principles. He sees social emancipation happening through means not associated with some of the most brutal regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No one claims that a theory of social transformation needs to pass this postmodernist 'seal of approval', but in the process of working out new alternatives

to what seems like an already established truth, the more critics you can please the better, and postmodernism has played an important part in the development of current discourse.

Postmodernist critique, as we soon shall see, associates grand narratives with something old-fashioned, and are therefore deemed unsuitable for current world affairs. Following this line of reasoning, presenting a theory that would fall into grand narrative territory might be enough for some to falsely dismiss it as yet another vision of grandeur.

### **1.1.2 Relevancy**

What this paper looks at is realistic ways for major social transformations to happen, which is the theme of Wright's book. With the development of what could also be called 'late-capitalist' society (Levitas 2000), it is interesting seeing where the current system is heading and if there are still possibilities for a socialist revolution to occur. Or have we have gotten to a point in time where capitalism has become such an ingrained part of the human condition that it is too late to turn the development around?

With the development of postmodernism, one of the big shifts within ideological thinking is that the adherence to grand narratives diminishes. This could very well be seen in connection with the development of modernism and the modern human condition, where uncertainty and fragmentation characterised the new reality. And the closer we get to the new millennium, the more the world seems to be steeped in chaos, at least for the individual experience. It should be mentioned that we are living in one of history's most stable periods, and that calling the human condition of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries fragmented and uncertain might seem somewhat melodramatic. Still, there is reason for concern. Especially if we find ourselves on the losing side of the current global economy (which, depending on definition, could be most of us).

'The 99 %' became the slogan for the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS), referencing a supposed statistic that in the US, 1 percent of the people control a majority, if not almost all, of the means of production, capital and political influence. One can argue about the numbers, but OWS nonetheless points to something that perhaps should be causing more anger than it already is: rampant growth in the unequal distribution of wealth, which according to an Oxfam report (Hardoon 2015) released in 2015, only grows. The numbers show that while it is not entirely 1 % vs. 99 %, in 2014 the richest 1 percent owned 48 percent of total global wealth, leaving 52 percent to be shared between the remaining 99 percent (Oxfam 2015: 2). If you combine this with the financial crisis of 2008, and what many perceive to be the financial elites running wild,

you should have the perfect recipe for social upheaval and willingness towards working for social change.

If we then turn to look at the modern, fragmented human, it is not difficult to understand why social emancipation might be moving slowly. We are at a point in time where the constant bombardment of impressions have become natural. Imagine how the first people in the great cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century felt, with Charles Baudelaire writing about the shocks of modern city life, and then consider the impressions people today have to endure. Individualism has also grown to become one of the defining features of modern life, and the combination of these aspects play a part in the difficulty of establishing an environment in which social transformation can happen. This is not to say that social conscience has gone away, but for many it involves doing things outside the framework of the regular capitalist system, as we will see in Wright's analysis of transformational theories.

At the same time, this is not an attempt to blame the average person for not climbing to the barricades once again, but rather an attempt to understand why we have these systematic structures and what can be done to change them. Some of the blame lies with an economic system that has grown 'too big to fail' and that keeps the average person struggling to get a foothold. Because of this, the argument in favour for the necessity of utopia might make more sense. If the sentiment amongst the ones getting the short end of the stick is that their situation is gradually getting worse, it might be time to start looking at unorthodox means of change.

Still, utopia in its simplest expression is simply a longing. A longing for something better or at the very least, something else, and this feeling is not lost on Wright.

### **1.1.3 Would Wright care?**

How does it influence Wright, if that should be the case, to align himself with the grand narrative tradition and by that making himself susceptible to postmodernist critique? The answer can actually be found in the preface of *Envisioning Real Utopias*. As a young student at Berkeley, Wright found himself running a seminar called "Utopia and Revolution", igniting his interest in Marx and repurposing Marxist theory. With this came the start of the Real Utopias Project, and combined with the development of capitalism and liberal democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union, Wright found himself researching alternatives to the current system.

"The idea of the project was to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of different arenas of social institutions rather than on either general, *abstract formulations of grand designs* [emphasis mine], or on small immediately attainable reforms of existing practices. This is a tricky kind of discussion to pursue rigorously. It is much easier to talk about concrete ways of tinkering with existing arrangements than it is to formulate plausible radical reconstructions. Marx was right that detailed blueprints of alternative designs are often pointless exercises in fantasy. What I and my collaborators in the Real Utopias Project wanted to achieve was a clear elaboration of workable institutional principles that could inform emancipatory alternatives to the existing world. This falls between a discussion simply of the moral values that motivate the enterprise and the fine-grained details of institutional characteristics" (Wright 2010: x).

Looking at this excerpt from Wright's introduction, he seems to be distancing himself from what he deems grand designs, pointing to Marx's views on utopian thinking (which we will get back to) and aligning himself with those ideals. The goal for Wright, judging from his introduction, is to find alternatives to current systems without delving into traditional utopian territory. His use of *grand designs* hints towards the same language as grand narratives, and reading the reasoning behind his project, he seems interested in staying out of grand narrative waters. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to evaluate his work in light of grand narratives. Thus, it feels justified and relevant to subject Wright and his *Envisioning Real Utopias* to this analysis.

## **1.2 Structure of the study**

In chapter 2, there will be a run through of what constitutes postmodernist critique of grand narratives, which lays the groundwork for the development of the methods' chapter and the analytical framework constructed in chapter 3. This theory chapter also look at the utopian tradition, considering how the historical aspect is important for understanding the development of the postmodern shift in political theory. In the same vein, some space is given Marxist theory, seeing how Wright belongs to this school of thought. This includes a discussion on the utopian characteristics in Marx, seeing how there are similarities in the way in which both writers eschew (Marx to a greater degree) the idea of belonging to grand narratives and utopianism, respectively.

In chapter 3, the analytical framework for analysis is developed, based on the theories laid out in chapter 2, focusing on the postmodern theories of Lyotard and Malpas.

In chapter 4, we will take a look at some key aspects of Wright's theory. The focus will mainly be on his critique of capitalism and his theories of transformation, seeing how this is one of the crucial aspects of his writing.

In chapter 5, after having decided Wright's position with regards to grand narratives, there will be a discussion on how grand narrative theory and utopian thinking might be more useful than what postmodern thinking seem to acknowledge. Considering how it is almost the antithesis of the postmodern vision of system organisation, it is interesting to see if this line of thinking might not be so horribly out of date after all.

### **1.3 Main findings**

With our point of departure being that Wright in his introduction said that he wanted to avoid creating a grand design, what we find is that Wright does not propose a grand narrative theory. If we put Wright's theories to the test by way of mainly Lyotard and Malpas (who create the foundation for grand narrative theories for this paper), this paper will show that Wright is not proposing a grand narrative, this on account of him being aware of the uphill battle with the current system be. He sees that a transformation to an egalitarian socialist system, without harming democratic principles, is looking close to impossible, at least right now.

## Chapter 2 – Theory

In this chapter, the thinkers and theories that will form the foundation for the analysis will be presented. These include postmodern theory, represented by Jean-Francois Lyotard and Simon Malpas, an introduction to the utopian tradition, and a look into the utopian characteristics in Marx, seeing how Wright belongs to the Marxist tradition. The first is in order to form an outline of grand narrative theory and the postmodern thought surrounding it, seeing how this forms the foundation for the paper. The second is there to throw light on the utopian tradition and its relevancy in modern political thought. Since Wright calls his book *Envisioning Real Utopias*, it is natural to take a look at how this tradition fits in with today's discourse, which will be picked back up in chapter five, with the discussion of the necessity of utopian thinking in modern political theory. The third point, Marx as a utopian, is to show the connection between Marxism and utopian ideas and how the lines never are quite clear.

### 2.1 Grand narratives and postmodernism

How do we describe the defining features of postmodernity and its relationship to the legitimacy and acquisition of knowledge? In his 1979 work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard gives one of the more defining guides on postmodernity, one of the main questions being about the "condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). The word *postmodernism* is used by Lyotard to describe this condition. What Lyotard investigates is the process of generating knowledge and the way it is put to use by the different levels of society, from individuals to society as a whole.

Grand narratives (also known as master narratives) came up in Lyotard's 1979 work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Grand narratives are a way for already established rules of power to legitimize themselves. At the basic level, they can be compared to storytelling in tribal times, where a fable or myth helped gain knowledge of the world and where you would have creation myths that gave legitimacy to why things were as they were (e.g. mountains being placed there by heroes). Grand narratives thusly reinforce why we act the way we do, or why society functions as it does, and give themselves credibility that can be hard to question, without seeming to instigate trouble. "Things are the way they always have been and so they shall continue to be, according to X" seems to be the message. With the change to the age of enlightenment and the following shift from religion to science, we saw a change in how nature was explained. The feudal narrative, for instance, provided legitimacy to the norms

and rules of the age, not merely an explanation. But the ways power relations and system structures were explained still continued as a form of narrative, since social theory and historiography are akin to telling a story, and then also offer narratives.

When defining postmodernity, Lyotard puts forth a simple definition (as he himself calls it) as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). When studying this "incredulity", the main goal for Lyotard is to look at how developed societies have altered our perception of knowledge; it becomes a commodity, commercialised like so much else (Lyotard 1985: 5). In the current knowledge-driven economy, it is crucial to control and manipulate ideas, as it is the key to survive, and perhaps more importantly, making profits. Further, Lyotard (1984: 4) writes that "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange". This marks a shift in the way in which knowledge is perceived: a shift towards commercialism. Ruth Levitas (2000: 32), however, defines 'postmodernism' as threefold; it can "refer to a structural change in the nature of the society we live in, or a broad, cultural, political and theoretical condition which results from this structural change, or a narrower artistic or aesthetic movement more properly termed 'postmodernism'".

The next concept, metanarratives, refers to a set of rules that works to determine the legitimacy of certain narratives and offers criteria for which to judge "which ideas and statements are legitimate, true and ethical for each different form of narrative" (Malpas 2005: 37). How does the concept of metanarratives influence narrative theory? Narratives, simply explained, is "the ways in which the world is understood through the stories we tell about it – that tie together disparate ideas, impressions and events to form coherent sequences" (Malpas 2005: 36). Grand narratives in relation to this, is an overreaching narrative whose job it is to tie together narratives and metanarratives, forming a cohesive picture of "[...] how the world works, how it develops over history, and the place of human beings within it. Put simply, grand narratives construct accounts of human society and progress" (Malpas 2005: 37).

Grand narratives are then split into two different categories: speculative- and emancipatory grand narratives. When it comes to speculative grand narratives, "true knowledge...is comprised of reported statements [that] are incorporated into a metanarrative of subject that guarantees their legitimacy" (Lyotard 1984: 35). This means that the outcome is somewhat decided up front and then experiences moulds in order to reach it.

The approach of the grand narrative of emancipation takes a different path, one where the end goal is to liberate humans from what is holding it back: mysticism and dogma. In this approach, "knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject: its only legitimacy (though it is formidable) is the fact that it allows morality to become reality" (Lyotard 1984: 36). In this narrative, knowledge is there to help humans understand, and hopefully improve, the human condition: to liberate them from the shackles of ignorance, oppression and prejudice. Alternatively, as Malpas puts it: "[...] modernity's grand narratives present an idea of the development of knowledge as a progress towards universal enlightenment and freedom" (Malpas 2005: 38).

These two different approaches have two clearly different goals in mind. Speculative grand narrative theory works with an agenda in mind and its function is to support and work in favour of an already established 'truth'. In this case, you would say that it is working against what should be seen as the main goal of knowledge: propelling the human race towards a better future. This, however, becomes the primary goal of the grand narrative of emancipation, which you could argue for being the 'nobler' of the two, trying to improve the human condition by using knowledge to free us from the ancient hold of superstition and ignorance.

Postmodernism, a child of the modernity project, emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and set out to radically change the way in which we see the world and the way of how knowledge is perceived, turning our concept of truth and knowledge on its head. If we then again look to the definition put forward by Lyotard at the start of this chapter, where he defines postmodernism as a scepticism towards metanarratives (Lyotard 1984: xxiv), the source of the conflict becomes clear. One of the main reasons for the diminishing influence of grand narratives, according to Lyotard, can be traced back to one thing: profit. In his 1988 work, *The differend: phrases in dispute*, he writes that modern capitalism "does not constitute a universal history, it is trying to constitute a world market" (Lyotard 1988: 179). Capitalism has become the supreme leader of the postmodern society and the hunt for a unifying narrative takes a backseat to the hunt for profits. No longer is the unifying grand narrative a goal, and knowledge fragmentation is acceptable as long as they are profitable. Capitalism, as Lyotard puts it, is not interested in having the last word, "but rather [seeking] to have the next word" (Lyotard 1988: 138).

As Lyotard points out, not only is the way we perceive knowledge changing, but it has actually become a commodity in itself in the postmodern society and helps to form the basis for power. Information is crucial for producers, and in modern society, you will find that the most powerful are the ones with the greatest knowledge resources. This leads to a 'battle of knowledge' (Malpas



2005: 39), where the only grounds for judging the value of a narrative come from their efficacy with regards to making the capitalist system more efficient. This way of looking at knowledge, and the close ties that is made to capitalist efficacy, is concerning Lyotard. He thinks that it has ramifications for the contemporary society, not only with regards to the way we view not only knowledge, but also art, as both only exists in this world view as a means to making the producers more efficient and contributing to the economy's health (Malpas 2005: 39).

This poses a risk of creating a postmodern society whose sole reason is the everlasting chase of efficiency, at least according to Lyotard, who sees this evolution as detrimental to society and mankind. Markets, and especially the ones for technology, have taken upon themselves to decide what society needs, because people themselves cannot be trusted to know what is best for them. "In this sense, the system seems to be a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing in order to rehumanize it at a different level of normative capacity" (Lyotard 1984: 63). This tunnel vision when it comes to knowledge means that other criteria have to yield, and no longer will competence be defined on the grounds of being true/false, just/unjust and so forth. (Lyotard 1984: 51). Lyotard's attitude towards the development of postmodern society, and his scepticism, seems to stem from the interplay between markets and knowledge, or rather the lack of. No longer could innovation and development be compared with progress (Malpas 2005: 43).

There are those who criticise Lyotard and the views put forth by him and like-minded thinkers. One of the main points of disagreement is the alleged fragmentation of scientific discourse, where critics like Steven Connor counters with the work of scientists to account for "the operation of all forces known in nature – a grand narrative if there ever was one" (Connor 1997: 30-31). Connor is not satisfied with Lyotard's view on the contemporary situation, and thinks that the whole 'narrative' concept is a linguistic construct, which only survives on the fact that people accept it (Connor 1989: 31).

## **2.2 The Utopian tradition**

Utopian thinking within political theory has a long history, but it was Sir Thomas More, in his 1516 work *Utopia*, that first formulated the idea of an actual utopia. To call what More presents a political theory would be a stretch, but what he proposed would lay the groundwork for five hundred years of utopian thinking. Utopia presents an imaginary society with near perfect qualities for which humankind can aspire to reach and work towards. Or, as Krishan Kumar

puts it in his introduction to utopian thinking: "To live in a world that cannot be but where one fervently wishes to be: that is the literal essence of utopia" (Kumar 1991: 1). Right off the bat, utopias have an element of fantasy to them, and might conjure images of tropical paradises and the land of milk and honey, and perhaps this might be necessary in order to incite among the people the wish to improve the current situation. "But it is never simply dreaming", Kumar writes, "it always has one foot in reality" (1991: 2).

The common view, as Levitas writes in her article "For Utopia: Utopian function in late capitalist society", is that utopian thinking is often viewed as a literary fantasy genre, or perhaps more relevant to this paper: a political vision that smacks of totalitarianism. Wright's position, on the other hand, is more in line with the more moderate view of Ernst Bloch, whose view is that utopia manifests itself just as much in daily life by people longing or wishing for something not there. If we follow this argument, Levitas puts forth the concise definition of utopia as "the expression of the desire for a better way of living" (Levitas 2000: 27). If we choose to follow this, Wright's concept of real utopias starts to make a whole lot more sense. However, the idea of utopian thought as something totalitarian and dangerous is of course not without grounds in reality. For many, hearing the word utopia might trigger images of some of the brutal regimes of the last century, whose grandiose plans laid countries in ruin and millions dead. This makes it understandable that with the movement towards late modernism and postmodernism, there would follow a general suspicion towards those promoting grand ideas of what many would see as visions of grandeur.

Marx himself did not like to be labelled a utopian thinker, and supposedly said that "he who outlines a program for the future is a reactionary" (Manuel and Manuel 1979: 698), showing his disdain. The idea, it seems, was that this kind of thinking distracted workers from reality and the historical development, which again would distract the proletariat from reaching its political goals (e.g. religion as the "opiate of the masses"). Socialism was not supposed to be taken lightly and early utopian-socialists (such as Robert Owen) were to be replaced with 'scientific socialism' (Manuel and Manuel 1979: 698), washing Marxism's hands free of utopian connections.

### **2.3 Marx and Co.**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of some of the most gruesome regimes operating in the name of communism. This has put a dent in the Marxist legacy, and as we shall see with the development

of postmodernism: a growing distaste for anything resembling the grand notions and pomp of the ideologies of yore. With a shift towards analytical Marxism, thinkers such as John Roemer and Philippe van Parijs focused on updating Marx's theories to better fit the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Wright does when positioning himself in the Marxist tradition. Thus, in order to understand Wright, the Marxist concepts of *exploitation* and *alienation* need to be mentioned. These are also especially relevant as one of Wright's focal points is the worker, and a worker-owned corporation (the Basque cooperative Mondragón) is used as a case study for democratically-organised corporations.

The Marxist concept of alienation refers to how private property inhibits people from developing their full human potential, for both workers and exploiters. The original idea was an abolition of wage-labour, which in theory should lead to a flowering of human potential and the end of unfulfilling work. This is to be achieved through the socialization of means of the production, a core tenet of Marxism, and the idea is to make work life's prime want again. The inherent injustice between worker and owner of means of production is relevant for the analysis of Wright, since one of his examples of real utopias is a Basque cooperative corporation, chosen to illustrate how a system where the workers are more or less in charge of the production, can implement a structure minimising worker alienation.

"Marxian exploitation is defined as the expropriation of surplus labour, where the definition of surplus labour depends on the labour theory of value. Surplus labour is the excess of time laboured by the worker over the amount of labour embodied in the bundle of goods the worker consumes, under the assumption that his entire wage is spent on that bundle. Thus, exploitation is said to exist because the amount of dead labour the worker can command through purchasing commodities with his income is less than the amount of labour he expends in production" (Roemer 1982: 282).

Roemer's definition of the concept of Marxian exploitation is concise and shows how the worker often ends up getting the short end of the stick with regards to the amount of work put in vs. what he receives as compensation. Or as defined by Cohen, "what raises a charge of exploitation is not that the capitalist appropriates some of the value the worker produces, but that he appropriates some of the value of *what* the worker produces" (Cohen 1988: 226-7). But is it always exploitation when workers sell their labour?

The answer is usually yes. While there might not be anything inherently unjust about voluntarily working for others, it is unjust when the worker is "forced," which is what happens when

labourers do not own any means of production and then must work for a capitalist, in order to survive in a capitalist economy (Roemer 1982: 282). The exploitation theory might be extended to not only explain worker-owner relationships, but also to describe the relationship between rulers and subjects. If we replace means of production with means of power, the equation can explain the struggle of the 'ordinary man' to relate and influence the system and power holders that surround him. The feeling of alienation is a crucial part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century persona and the feeling of hopelessness seems understandable, when faced with such an intricate system that is the current state of politics.

This leads us to another aspect of Wright's study that will be given ample focus in this paper: his transformation theory. The classic Marxist idea of transformation is tied to Marx's view of history and how he saw revolution amongst the workers as the inevitable next step in history. This revolutionary aspect has lulled over the course of the last century, and Wright is no different, but in his analysis of possible ways of transformation, we will see that there is no simple way to change an ingrained system. As Marx himself wrote in "Critique of the Gotha Program", "there is also correspondingly a period of political transition, in which the state can be nothing else but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat" (Marx 1875/1996: 222). To avoid this; while at the same time making any sort of worthwhile changes to society, is going to prove difficult.

### **2.3.1 Utopian characteristics in Marx?**

Since this is a paper where the subject of utopianism is one of the cornerstones, it is relevant to take a look at the position taken by Marx himself, since Wright is so steeped in Marxist tradition. Right off the bat, Marx was critical of the utopian socialists preceding him, regarding what Robert Owen and Charles Fourier were doing as reactionary and dabbling in a fantasy world (Manuel and Manuel 1979: 698). It could still be argued that Marx himself could be branded a utopian, depending on the definition one chooses to use and how to interpret lines like "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!", as Marx writes in his "Critique of the Gotha Programme" (1875/1996: 215). This higher phase of communist society described by Marx carries connotations to utopian thinking, even if "Isaac Newton framed no hypotheses and Karl Marx wrote no utopias; that was the official stance", as stated by Manuel and Manuel (1979: 713). Building on that, if you choose to use a more open definition, how can statements such as "in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free

development of all" (Marx 1988: 231) not do anything but to invoke the spirit of Utopia? After all, in its simplest sense, utopia is nothing but looking to the future and wishing for something else. This definition is vague, but it also illustrates what kind of ground we are moving on; the dividing lines are blurry and knowing when one is crossing from one into the other is never entirely obvious.

## Chapter 3 – Method

To identify when an author does (or does not) present a grand narrative, we have to return to some of the principles presented in chapter two and from these construct a framework for recognising elements of grand narrative theory. Thus, there are certain features that need to be present in *Envisioning Real Utopias* for us to be able to identify his theory as a grand narrative (or not), and these features are mainly to be determined from the theory presented by Lyotard and Malpas in the previous chapter. Since we are looking at grand narratives from the perspective of postmodernism, it is natural that the basis for what constitutes a grand narrative should be decided on the premise of postmodern theory. Only after these criteria are in place, can Wright be properly analysed in light of the postmodern approaches to grand narrative theory.

### 3.1 Framework for identifying grand narratives

As a start, the most prominent feature of a grand narrative is the attempt to form an overreaching narrative, or a unified picture of the development of history, how the world works and how humans fit within (Malpas 2005: 37). This attempt of creating a narrative for human development is perhaps the defining feature of grand narrative theory, and with its two subsets of speculative and emancipatory narratives, it lays the foundation for analysing Wright's theories. Emancipatory grand narratives are especially interesting, seeing how they promote the use of knowledge in the service of humanity as a way to reach a state of enlightenment and freedom from what could be described as the oppression of ignorance (Malpas 2005: 38). These factors, if we follow the reasoning of Lyotard and Malpas, seems to be the defining features of what constitutes a grand narrative and are therefore a natural point of departure.

This means that the analysis will use a criterion that focuses on knowledge, and offerings that search to provide an explanation for how the world works. A sub-criterion of this will be concerning that of grand narratives of emancipation. The reason for including this is that it covers a part of grand narrative theory that might be beneficial to look for in Wright's writing, seeing how emancipation is an important part of his work. For his work to be characterised as a grand narrative of emancipation, there would need to be evidence of him working determined towards a goal of higher enlightenment, while making an active attempt to free humans from mysticism and dogma, which is regarded a hindrance for human development (Lyotard 1984: 36).

The next criterion is the intent of the author. Do we find the author taking an active stance towards his own work with regards to narrative theory? Asking this question will give an idea about the author's own standing, which can be useful to keep in mind, seeing how the author probably is self-aware of his own position and writes with this in mind. If the author says he has intention of one thing, but then shows signs of going in another direction, it could be a sign of indecisiveness.

If we look at the relationship between utopian tradition and Marxism, they show how blurry lines can be when discussing these kind of questions. This is something we need to keep in mind, since so much is dependent on what definition one might choose as criteria and the discussions on whether Marx was or was not a utopian thinker, shows that there is a lot of leeway.

Something to keep in mind is what if we find that one of the criterions show evidence of a grand narrative, while the other does not. In such a scenario the question becomes if one should take precedence, and if so, which one. Author intent is important, because if the author take a stance toward the idea of grand narratives, that should be a strong indicator of how to approach the piece. Still, if we find strong evidence for the criterion for knowledge and the grand narrative of emancipation, this would mean that the either the author fails his own mission (or these criterions fails their task) and would end up trumping author intent.

When it comes to searching for these criterions, author intent should be simple enough to discern. This would mean finding the author mentioning something about his standing, or at least something akin to possessing a meaning concerning the subject of grand narratives. The search for evidence of a grand narrative of emancipation will take place by analysing certain parts of Wright's writing, focusing on his criticism of capitalism and what he suggest as a remedy for the current state of affairs.

## Chapter 4 – Analysis

This chapter put the theories presented in chapter three onto *Envisioning Real Utopias*, to establish whether Wright presents a grand narrative or not. The focus will be on certain parts of the book, and his ideas of transformation make up the main part of the analysis, but Wright's critique of capitalism is also important. What we look for is clues indicating a relationship to grand narratives and that of utopian thinking, and one way to search for this is by looking at how he proposes social change.

### 4.1 Introduction

One of the first noticeable elements about *Envisioning Real Utopias* is how the title is referencing a step towards something more realistically feasible in utopian thinking. Seeing how inequality is on the rise (Hardoon 2015), the end goal for Wright is systematic changes and a rebirth of the theories belonging to the left. In the introduction, he mentions two points that speak for his view on the traditional thoughts on utopia and grand narratives, saying that "vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or worse still, which leads us to some unforeseen abyss". At the same time, he takes a jab at conservatives for defaulting to a position where "grand designs for social reconstruction nearly always end in disaster" (Wright 2010: 6). With these two statements, Wright positions himself in the middle, noting that the way of traditional utopians might not be very fruitful, while simultaneously pointing out that the reactionary position of the conservatives might do just as much damage to social progress.

For realists, these ideas might be hard to swallow. People like Frederick Hayek, an Austrian economist and classical liberalist, describe it as "fatal conceit" (Hayek 1988: 21), which Wright explains as "the mistaken belief that through rational calculation and political will, society can be designed in ways that will significantly improve the human condition" (Wright 2010: 7). There is relative safety in existing systems, which although might not be perfect, are at least serviceable and functioning, but for Wright this does not cut it, and real utopias for him mean the opposite of the fantasy world of Thomas More. Instead, he looks at "utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible way stations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change" (Wright 2010: 6).



Wright points to how Marxism suffers under (an often deserved some might say) bad reputation from years of having been associated with some of the worst forms of government that were operating in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Combined with utopianism, which also have had its fair share of criticism, this might be what both traditions need for a fresh start:

"We now live in a world in which these radical visions are often mocked rather than taken seriously. Along with the postmodernist rejection of "grand narratives," there is an ideological rejection of grand designs, even by the many people still on the left of the political spectrum. This need not mean an abandonment of deeply egalitarian emancipatory values, but it does reflect a cynicism about the human capacity to realize those values on a substantial scale. This cynicism, in turn, weakens progressive political forces in general" (Wright 2010: 8).

In this statement, Wright points towards a cynical position taken by not only postmodernists, but also left leaning factions, regarding the role of grand narratives and designs. Is it a cry for the protection of such ideas? It might look like that at first, but Wright's position in all of this seems to be on the middle road he calls *real utopias*, which looks like a term designed to walk the line between grand narratives on one side, and sober realism on the other. When looking at it like this, it does not seem as a defence of grand narratives, as much as it seems that Wright is interested in creating something that might appease both camps.

In her article "For Utopia: The (limits of the) Utopian function in late capitalist society", Ruth Levitas mentions how the critique of utopias often seem to include the trope of "where there is vision, the people perish" (Levitas 2000: 31). With this, she references the thought that utopia can only manifest itself through totalitarianism, reliant on repression and violence in order to realise itself. She follows the same line of argument as Wright will later, criticising the tendency to eschew idealist ideals in the current political climate. Levitas also comments on the condition of postmodernity, saying that utopianism is a project belonging to the age of modernism, not postmodernism. "Here, the negative consequences of utopia are attributed to the pitfall of modernity, in particular, to the post-Enlightenment insistence on reason and universal values, which is potentially totalitarian" (Levitas 2000: 32). The goal for Levitas is to defend the function of utopian thought in current political theory, much as Wright does, but she instead focuses on theory and the connection to thoughts on art.

Further, Levitas has a comment for Lyotard's view of grand narratives:

"For example, Lyotard's challenge to 'grand narratives' does not augur well for projecting into the future wholesale schemes of social transformation (if that is how we understand utopia). The 'deconstruction of the subject' undermines the possibility of discussing interests beyond the self-defined identity and identification of individuals, so that collectivities are theoretically disintegrated into selves, and further into fragmentary selves. Moral and ethical absolutes are impossible; the claim that one society is better than another (a claim perhaps fundamental to the utopian project) is undermined. Even the idea of society itself as in some sense a totality, a concept which underpins the whole notion of social science, as well as utopia as society transformed (if that is how we understand utopia), is called into question. There is not just a loss of hope in the social, but a loss of a belief question. Krishan Kumar commenting on this anti-utopian character of contemporary social theory, argues that if postmodernists are right, 'it is not simply that "there aren't any good or brave causes left" to fight for anymore', but that there cannot be. The quest for utopia in this reading is an irretrievably modernist project" (Levitas 2000: 34).

This idea that after postmodernism made its impression on ideological thinking, there can no longer be made any genuine attempt at achieving social transformation is something that occupies a lot of the work of Levitas, and the passage might make the utopian project seem bleak. Still, she is one of the thinkers that together with Wright still encourages the advancement of something akin to utopian theories in modern political thinking. But where she argues for something more akin to traditional utopian thinking, Wright's position looks certainly more pragmatic, looking to avoid much of what is associated with utopian thinking and finding room in the cracks of modern society for alternatives to grow, from the bottom up. To Wright, there is still a good fight to be had with the postmodern notion of there being nothing left to fight for.

Is the individualism associated with the postmodern search for one's own narrative a threat to the hope of ever moving us forward in a way that would improve the world according to utopian devotees? According to some thinkers, in this case Levitas and Kumar, the chase for individualism and self-realization that has become one of the defining features of newer generations, is raising obstacles for radical social change. Who is going to advocate community change, when the people who need it are too busy with their latest self-realization project?

Nonetheless, we are still seeing people taking action against perceived injustice, with the "Occupy Wall Street" (OWS) movement being one of the most prominent protest movements of recent times, fighting against both economic and social inequality, with the OWS perhaps

representing a culmination of the resentment and insecurity that people are feeling with a growing chasm between rich and poor. Reports are showing that by 2016, the wealthiest 1 percent of world are likely to be in control of over 50 percent of global wealth (Hardoon 2015). According to a report from Oxfam (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) that was published earlier this year,

In 2014, the richest 1% of people in the world owned 48% of global wealth, leaving just 52% to be shared between the other 99% of adults on the planet. Almost all of that 52% is owned by those included in the richest 20%, leaving just 5.5% for the remaining 80% of people in the world. If this trend continues of an increasing wealth share to the richest, the top 1% will have more wealth than the remaining 99% of people in just two years, [...]with the wealth share of the top 1% exceeding 50% by 2016 (Hardoon 2015: 2).

Oxfam defines itself as an organization that works with finding solutions to global problems of poverty and injustice<sup>1</sup>. This means that they most likely have an agenda tied to the left and organizations like OWS, but the numbers gathered from Credit Suisse Research Institute (as stated in the Oxfam's reports first source), shows that the ever-growing divide between the haves and have-nots seem to be a reality. This brings us to the opening chapter of Wright's work, which fittingly opens with a chapter called "What's so bad about capitalism?"

"There is a great distance between the radical democratic egalitarian ideal and the social reality of the world in which we live. The dream of democratic egalitarians is to create the institutions needed to further the realization of that ideal. The first step in turning the dream into a practical ambition is to figure out that it is about the world in which we live that obstructs this realization" (Wright 2010: 33).

With this, Wright points to capitalism as an obstacle for humanity reaching its full potential, having contributed heavily to the fragmented world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and by having an obfuscating effect on efforts made to achieve social emancipation. Therefore, it is important to look at Wright's critique of the capitalist system, because it lays the premise for the development of his theories and suggestions for change.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/about>

#### **4.1.1 Author intent**

As mentioned in chapter 1.1.3, Wright states in the opening of *Envisioning Real Utopias* that he is not interested in creating a "grand design", which bears resemblance to talk of grand narratives. To reiterate his position: "The idea of the project was to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of different arenas of social institutions rather than on either general, *abstract formulations of grand designs* [emphasis mine], or on small immediately attainable reforms of existing practices." (Wright 2010: x). Using the criteria for author intent, as laid out in chapter three, this quote from Wright's introduction is a point on the non-grand narrative side of the scale.

#### **4.1.2 Is capitalism as a system inherently negative?**

Capitalism has become, and has been for some time, the de rigueur economic system for global economic influence. When the cold war ended in 1991, with the fall of the Soviet Union marking its demise, the era of communist influence had come to an end. This brought about major shifts in the global political situation, and for some it even marked "the end of history." Francis Fukuyama, who was mentioned in passing earlier, published his *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992 (building on an essay from 1989). In these two works Fukuyama discusses his theory of *the end of history*, one in which the battle between capitalism and communism during the cold war was the last great battle of the ideologies. Of course, we all know the outcome.

"In watching the flow events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something fundamental has happened in world history" (Fukuyama 1989: 1). Undoubtedly, something big did happen with the fall of the iron curtain. A nearly 45 year long conflict between the last two superpowers ended, a war that was on the brink of becoming nuclear and had led both countries to fighting proxy wars around the globe to gain influence for their ideology and keeping the other out. After the dust settled, the US was the last country standing and became a world hegemon, the hyperpower that it was in those days. The way that Fukuyama chooses to interpret this situation that came into existence after the Cold War, is by essentially saying that from now on there is only one game in town, at least for democracies, and that game is liberal democracy.

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point

of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989: 1).

The end of history is not a new concept, and although Fukuyama often is considered to have written *the book* on it, the concept goes back several hundred years. Thomas More can also be said to present a concept similar to that of the end of history, and, perhaps more important for this paper, Karl Marx.

"The notion of the end of history is not an original one. Its best-known propagator was Karl Marx, who believed that the direction of historical development was a purposeful one determined by the interplay of material forces, and would come to an end only with the achievement of a communist utopia that would finally resolve all prior contradictions. But the concept of history as a dialectical process with a beginning, a middle, and an end was borrowed by Marx from his great German predecessor Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Fukuyama 1989: 2).

Of course, the end of history does not refer to the end of the world, but, as explained by Simon Malpas, it can be tied into the idea of grand narratives. Rather, it refers to the shift from the modern project to postmodernity, and an end to a way of looking at history as a metanarrative that forms a linear view.

"In other words, what has ended is not the production of events themselves, but rather our need or ability to form a narrative from them that demonstrates their coherent, developmental logic and points to utopian future in which the conflicts and contradictions between them would not have been resolved" (Malpas 2005: 89).

Marx envisioned socialism as the final stage; the same way Fukuyama saw the western model of liberal democracy as the end-all ideology in the postmodern condition of which we live in. The idea of the postmodern state seems to be one where the understanding of history and past events as linear happenings is no longer the de facto way of interpreting society and its evolution. As we can see, Malpas mentions metanarratives, the same as Lyotard spoke of, and he seems to perpetuate the same feeling of a change in how we view the world. It seems that we to a larger degree experience things 'at once', a hodgepodge of impressions, thus it shares features with postmodern art, acting as an archive for future thinkers to pick from as pleased.

The concept of some sort of end of history or final phase of society has been a focal point for thinkers such as Fukuyama and Hegel, who spoke of emergence of freedom in the just society,

but this historic trajectory faces challenges from postmodern thinking. "The modern idea of progress has been challenged [...] it has been shown to be impossible" (Malpas 2005: 89). This adds to the general feeling of a gradually more fragmented worldview, showing that old perceptions might have to give room for a world not so easily perceived, and Wright is attempting to create solutions fitting this new reality.

Have we reached universal freedom in a just society? For Fukuyama, being a neo-conservative American, it might seem so. For the western liberal democracy, with its heavy market orientation, it probably looks like the last stop (at least for the United States). "While some present-day countries might fail to achieve stable liberal democracy, and others might lapse back into other, more primitive forms of rule like theocracy or military dictatorship, the *ideal* of liberal democracy could not be improved upon" (Fukuyama 1992: xi). With this reasoning, Fukuyama undermines the idea that the current system could be improved upon. Could it be said that this line of reasoning surrounding a just society falls into an idea in the nature of grand narratives by calling out the western liberal democracy as a winner? That would depend on whether Fukuyama views his theories as more in line with postmodern thought and considers them as something more akin to a death knell to grand narratives, rather than joining them, supported by the view of history

"as a single, coherent evolutionary process is rapidly coming to an end. It is not that there will be no more events, inventions, innovation or changes, but rather that these will serve to support rather than undermine liberal democracy as an 'ideal' world order" (Malpas 2005: 90).

For Wright, the idea of capitalism as an adequate final stage would seem unacceptable, as capitalism is not at all compatible with a just society. In Wright's eleven point critique of capitalism, his attitude towards the capitalistic system shows a clear distrust and displeasure with the ways it stands in the way of human development. The capitalistic system entails certain problems and has a detrimental effect on everything from democracy and people to the world as a whole, at least according to Wright:

1. Capitalist class relations perpetuate eliminable forms of human suffering.
2. Capitalism blocks the universalization of conditions for expansive human flourishing.
3. Capitalism perpetuates eliminable deficits in individual freedom and autonomy.
4. Capitalism violates liberal egalitarian principles of social justice.
5. Capitalism is inefficient in certain crucial respects.

6. Capitalism has a systematic bias towards consumerism.
7. Capitalism is environmentally destructive.
8. Capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values.
9. Capitalism, in a world of nation states, fuels militarism and imperialism.
10. Capitalism corrodes community.
11. Capitalism limits democracy (Wright 2010: 37).

As we can see, there is quite a list of grievances that Wright raises against the capitalist system, and this paper is not going to delve into each of these points. However, there are some of them that are more relevant with regards to the subject being explored. The first point focuses on the ways in which class relations contributes to an evil circle of human suffering, which hinders reaching a state that possibly would be better, implicating that a better world is reached by abandoning the capitalist system. Tied into this, Wright seems to think that capitalism blocks human flourishing, focusing on the possibility of a situation in which people has a better chance to utilise their talent and creative potential (Wright 2010: 45-46). This last point might seem familiar, as it is closely related to what Marx says about worker alienation. The idea that labourers are being underused and missing out on their true potential is an idea that is crucial to Marxist theory, and Wright carries on with this tradition. We see that this is an important point in Wright's theory, as the Mondragón Corporation is one of the examples of real utopias.

The next two items concerns freedom in capitalism, and how democracy might be better developed under a different system than capitalism. This last point is crucial in Wright's analysis; because his analysis of transformation is built upon the crucial point that transformation have to be done on democratic terms. The fact that Wright puts down the condition that any transformation has to be done with democracy in mind, shows that he follows up on his intention from the introduction: to avoid taking his idea in the direction of traditional grand designs (Wright 2010: x). The fact that he put this down as a requirement could perhaps be read as a grand narrative element, but the idea seem to be there to make sure that any attempt at transformation made will be made through "legal channels", not falling into the grand design he speaks of in the introduction. The democratic requirement thus become a safety switch, there to make sure that citizens' rights is taken care of.

### 4.1.3 Class relations and human suffering

"The world in which we live involves a juxtaposition of extraordinary productivity, affluence and enhanced opportunities for human creativity and fulfilment along with continuing human misery and thwarted human potential" (Wright 2010: 39). This is not only the case in capitalist countries, and it might be easy to slip into a mindset where this is considered an unpleasant fact and something that will follow us no matter what. Alternatively, it is merely regarded as a temporary state of being, one that would go away if only capitalism was free to act without state regulation and could release its full, unrestrained potential. Some might need to just pull themselves up by their bootstraps, because capitalism offers up a lot of opportunities to make something of your life, and if a person can't manage to use that chance for something productive, the blame is entirely on them for being lazy (Wright 2010: 40). As the quote often associated with Steinbeck goes: "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat, but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires."

On the other side, you have an argument that is crucial for socialist critique of the capitalist system: *capitalism systematically generates unnecessary human suffering*, unnecessary being that with some changes to the socioeconomic system, these sufferings might be eliminated. This is one of the core arguments coming from the anti-capitalist side (Wright 2010: 40). On the other hand, an argument in favour of capitalism is that it has contributed to a lot of growth both economically and technologically over the last two centuries, compared to prior systems. Yet, Wright argues, it perpetuates human suffering that perhaps could have been bettered in another *possible* state, one that capitalism stands in the way of possibly reaching: a better system of organisation. The improvements done by capitalism, Wright says, "fall short of what is possible" (Wright 2010: 41).

When we think about capitalism and exploitation, especially in light of socialist theory, we often go to one of the core tenements of socialist theory: worker exploitation. Here, the idea is to abolish the damaging relationship between the labourer and the owner of the means of production. "The economic interests of capitalists – the profits they command – therefore depend upon extracting as much labor effort from workers at as little cost as possible. This, roughly, is what is meant by 'exploitation'" (Wright 2010: 42). If you combine this with an incentive for capitalists to keep the number of unemployed high, so that you could both pay lower wages, while having a large number of unemployed labourers makes sure that workers know that they can be replaced (Wright 2010: 43). With a system like this, capitalists actually



benefit from increased vulnerability of workers, and thereby profit from the suffering of workers.

For Marx, the ultimate goal in worker's development was a higher phase of communist society after the revolution, where the work itself would be the goal for labourers and personal development would be the centre of attention. Wright build upon this argument when he use Mondragón, one of his examples of a "real utopia". As Marx Wrote:

"In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour...has vanished; after labour has become not only a means to life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Marx 1875/1996: 214/215).

This goal is connected to the idea of workers being in charge of their own means of production (as with Mondragón) and this is a concept that Wright shines a light on with the inclusion of a worker owned corporation. When the industrial revolution took hold, workers were reduced to "tools", just like the machines introduced. Production lines made it so that workers often ended up doing the same repetitive task for hours on end, no longer following the production from beginning to end. This meant the worker was not getting to use his full potential, and over time, this is detrimental to the human potential that might have been achieved. To Wright, the idea of a better society than the capitalist ones is not usually "simply that of a consumer paradise without poverty or material deprivation, but rather a social order in which individuals thrive, where their talents and creative potentials are nurtured and freely exercised to the fullest extent" (Wright 2010 45-46). This is part of the classical Marxist doctrine, and show how closely Wright is tied to the traditional Marxist way of thought.

#### **4.1.4 Human flourishing suffers under capitalism**

Wright raises three issues with regards to how capitalism still finds ways to block humanity from taking full advantage of it, even though it has made the possibility for human flourishing great. The first issue is how capitalism has a tendency to create big gaps in the access to the material conditions you actually need to live a fulfilling, flourishing life. The second is connected to what was discussed above, about people needing fulfilling jobs in order to use

their potential, where the problem in capitalism is that there are inequalities in having access to these jobs. Thirdly, capitalism brings along an unhealthy competitive drive, known as hyper competition, leaving destructive effects in its wake (Wright 2010: 46).

Markets could, at times, be seen as having certain qualities for equality, at least in the sense of class mobility, and a tendency to lessen certain non-economic inequalities often related to race, gender, religion or ethnicity (seeing how talent trumps all for employers). We can also find that rags to riches and self-made men sometimes are a reality, although few and far between, compared to those who never get to experience the upper echelons of capitalist society. The problem comes with one of the simplest truths about a free, competitive market: (as in a competition) someone has to lose for someone to win, where those losing tend to have it impact their lives in such a way that it ripples through to the next generation, each generation creating bigger inequalities as time passes by. This means that if markets get to operate unchecked by any form of offsetting non-market distribution mechanism, the resources needed to live flourishing lives will be very unevenly distributed, not only domestically, but globally as well (Wright 2010: 47).

"The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*- and does so in the proportion in which it procures commodities generally" (Marx 1988: 70).

According to Marx, the worker ends up "producing himself", becoming one of the commodities he is toiling away creating for consumption, with the end result being alienation, a result of the labour which itself has become an object.

"The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labor appears as *loss of reality* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*" (Marx 1988: 71).

These two quotes from Marx, gathered from his text *Estranged Labour*, illustrate how Wright's view on labour corresponds with that of Marx, following in the traditional footsteps of Marxism, while at the same time not carrying on the tradition of revolution, as we will see.

#### 4.1.5 Freedom in capitalism

When discussing moral values, the left often seems to claim a moral high ground compared to the right. It is on the left of the political spectrum that you usually find what you could call 'compassion'-politics: politics and policies that have a heavy focus on the social aspects of society ("safety nets", e.g. public health care). Usually, this requires a lot of government involvement in the lives of its citizens. This is a trade-off that has been one of the major points of criticism for the political right and is one of the main arguments that show up in the politics of the right (especially within libertarian capitalist traditions, where property rights and individual autonomy are some of the most important principles of governance).

But is it necessarily so that a capitalistic system is the system in which personal freedom and autonomy are best looked after? According to Wright, capitalism obstructs individual autonomy in two ways. The first one is the way that capitalist workplaces place certain restrictions on the worker's right to act with some kind of self-direction (Wright 2010: 50). The second one is how much of the so-called "individual freedom" under capitalism takes basis in wealth and ownership, which (as already discussed) capitalism does a pretty bad job distributing. This means that some people will have better opportunities than others to act freely and exercise their autonomy (Wright 2010: 51-52). Philippe Van Parijs, in his 1997 book *Real Freedom for All*, uses the term *real freedom* as "the capacity of individuals to act on their life plans, to be in a position to actually make the choices which matter to them" (Wright 2010: 51). This corresponds with much of what have been discussed; there is a huge gap between those who have, and those who do not, resulting in that some will find ways to release their full potential in a capitalist society, while others will have to work unfulfilling, menial jobs, resulting in them never getting to know their real freedom.

Van Parijs, being a left-libertarian, belongs to a tradition that combines individual self-ownership with an egalitarian approach, creating an approach similar to that of a "post-war liberal-democratic state" (Kymlicka 2002: 88). This strain of thought focuses on creating a society where everyone in the least start out with equal means of opportunity, while retaining private ownership. The egalitarian aspect of van Parijs and his equals (i.e. John Rawls) represents a "middle of the road" position, seen in some degree by the Nordic countries, and is an attempt to combine aspects of two ideologies to create a fairer society, harvesting what perhaps could be seen as the best of both worlds from the two political ideas. But if we judge from Wright's vantage point, this still does not solve the problem of capitalism being incompatible with democracy, seeing how he sees the two as polar opposites.

## 4.2 Finding alternatives to capitalism

So, if we were to look for an alternative to capitalism, where do we start? Now that Wright has shown us what he thinks are the main problems of the capitalist organisation of society, what does he propose as an alternative? Seeing how deep-rooted capitalism has become, making radical changes might bring back memories of revolutions and social upheaval, a picture that has haunted the communist reputation for some time now. According to Wright, this is also the case for other critics of capitalism, who have taken to look elsewhere for inspiration. Still, no other tradition comes close to matching the job Marxists have done when it comes to creating scientific theories to rival capitalism, but not without limitations (Wright 2010: 89).

One of Wright's dissatisfaction with Marx is that his ideas of capitalism's downfall is predicted through a deterministic theory, a theory in which we rely on capitalism to collapse on itself because of its inherent flaws. Marx calls it the *impossibility of capitalism*, and for him it was a matter of waiting for capitalism to become an unmanageable social order, destroying itself, and by default an alternative would have to develop (Wright 2010: 89). How do you get the results from such an event to form a society resembling of egalitarianism and democratic values? According to Wright, he says about Marx's logic:

"Here is where Marx's theory becomes especially elegant, for the contradictions which propel capitalism along its trajectory of self-erosion also create an historical agent – the working class – which has both an interest in creating a democratic egalitarian society and increasing capacity to translate that interest into action" (Wright 2010: 90).

This is a kind of pragmatist view of the situation, where it all boils down to having faith in the working class that ends up finding the solution through a common goal of solidarity.

Given enough time, capitalism will eventually end up on a trajectory that leads to its destruction, or at least that is the idea. From a historic perspective, why should not capitalism, as other systems have before, end up collapsing or being surpassed by another? Capitalism as a historically economic system "came into being as a result of the internal dynamics of the previous form of economy and [...] will eventually cease to exist" (Wright 2010: 90). This is common Marxist theory, and means that capitalism is in the possession of what is needed to keep on reproducing itself, but also what might end up destroying it. This is called *dynamic contradictions* and it is what eventually will undermine the system. Not only can capitalism be transformed into something else with the help of deliberative action, but *will* do so on account of its inherent flaws. This is not to say that the system replacing capitalism will be inherently

better for the citizens. The only thing certain is that something different will come along (Wright 2010: 90).

Basing his predicament on certain observations he made during the nineteenth century, Marx foretold certain developments within the capitalist system. First, the level of productivity would see a huge increase. Second, more and more of the production and means of production would be organised by capitalist firms, making their reach even bigger. Third, the development of capitalism would often lead to an increase in how capital would be concentrated, making it more centralised. This matches what the Oxfam Report said: fewer people and companies own more of the capital, making the imbalance greater, leading to markets being controlled by giant firms. Fourthly, and perhaps most important, all this would lead to an increased seriousness to the economic crises that sometimes disturb the markets.

"This final observation is linked to the first three: as a broad generalization, the more developed the forces of production are, the more comprehensive the market in a capitalist economy will be; and the more that market is dominated by giant corporations, the more severe its economic crises will be when they occur" (Wright 2010: 91).

If we look at the financial crisis of 2008, where banks who were too big to fail had to be bailed out, making Wright's concern for the current development seems justified, seeing how capitalism this way brings about uncertainty which in the end affects those further down the food chain.

#### **4.2.1 How can system change happen?**

The title of Wright's work, "Envisioning Real Utopias", conjures some immediate associations. An eventual change needs to be big enough to move society in a direction reminiscent of radical change, hence "utopia", but at the same time, the transformation needs to be grounded in reality. There is a contradiction here, as the connotations of the word 'utopia' usually invokes a picture far from reality, but by adding the word "real" in front Wright makes a statement, positioning himself against the classical image of utopia, and thereby distancing himself from what we have seen is a scrutinised tradition.

Utopianism has a history of not always providing useful blueprints for social change and many thinkers associated with the tradition keep their ideas in a realm that at times has more in common with fantasy than political life. Attempting to change this is perhaps one of the most

important things that Wright can do, and if we look at it in view of the postmodern discussion laid out above, it could be an examples of him trying to change the narrative. This change is in that case that of grand Marxist ideas, put into what could best be described as a "social emancipators handbook", where he looks at ways to affect the system from the bottom-up, instead of the top-down. By using real life examples and working with actual feasible projects, could one say that Wright is working his way in through the cracks of the fragmented, postmodern world? This approach, by taking a cue from his own theories of transformation, can be categorised as a "symbiotic metamorphosis" (see figure 1 on page 33), meaning that it attempts to approach transformation on the premise of already established institutions. Seeing how there are no implicit grand designs or grandiose ideas connected with this sort of approach, categorising it as not being a part of grand narrative theory should fall within reason. This can be tied back to author intent, as seen in 4.1.1, since this method works within the already established system and therefore actively avoid revolutionary approaches and involves a refusal to completely redraft a system (from scratch), something that falls within author intent.

If we look at the figure below, we can see the three trajectories of transformation laid out. We will come back to these in detail, but what could be immediately discerned, is how the three paths (the two latter being "siblings") behave with regards to the existing system. Ruptural transformation represents the traditional idea of revolutionary change, and if we remember what Wright says about democratic principles and his insistence on not creating a grand design, had he still ended up advocating this alternative, he could have been branded a grand narrative thinker. Because the first alternative in the figure represents everything that postmodern critics have against grand narratives. It is revolutionary and relies on winning wars as a measure of success, and it uses attacks on the state in order to upset the current social order. This is what we see critics such as Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper opposing, and what those who associate grand narratives with totalitarianism sees. And since Wright has an intention of staying out of this trajectory, his writing moves away from this very obvious attempt at a grand narrative.

The other two trajectories exemplifies alternative paths for change, moving in different directions than the revolutionary one. Of these two, the symbiotic one is the least grand narrative inclined (as we shall see), since it relies on the already existing system and work toward policy change through more traditional ways of political influence, making it a non-grand narrative, at least in terms of grand ideas for change.

**Vision of Trajectory of Systematic Transformations Beyond Capitalism (Wright 2010: 304).**

**Political Tradition**      **Pivotal Collective**      **Strategic Logic**      **Strategic Logic**      **Metaphors of**  
**Most Closely**      **Actors for**      **with Respect to the**      **with Respect to the**      **Success**  
**Associated with**      **Transformation**      **State**      **State**

**Logic of Transformation**

Revolutionary socialist/communist	Classes organized in political parties	Attack the state	Confront the bourgeoisie	War (victories and defeats)
Anarchist	Social movements	Build alternatives outside of the state	Ignore the bourgeoisie	Ecological competition
Social democratic	Coalitions of social forces and labor	Use the state: struggle on the terrain of the state	Collaborate with the bourgeoisie	Evolutionary adaptations

**Ruptural**

**Interstitial Metamorphosis**

**Symbiotic Metamorphosis**

### 4.2.2 A fragmented world

The new human condition that is tied to the idea of postmodernism is described by Jean-Luc Nancy as:

"There is no longer any world: no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation... There is no longer any Spirit of the world, nor is there any history before whose tribunal one could stand" (Nancy 1997: 4).

This lack of sense, lack of order and lack of meaning of life, is not a new thing within the modern project; in the times of early modernism, when Baudelaire walked the streets of Paris, feeling the modern world with its alienation and distance bearing down on him. The feeling of alienation, a lack of sense and place in the world, seems to be a symptom of the human condition in the modern world. We enter a phase of history where individuality (in the western world) is the "ideology" of choice and combined with an everlasting bombardment from markets who keeps us chasing the next thing. This gives us no time to stop and take in the world and perhaps even find some sort of sense of community. The closer we get, the further away from each other we end up, each chasing his own narrative.

One of the big problems for Wright then becomes how to find a way to execute a comprehensive transformation within the framework of this new world.

"A sceptic might argue thus: If indeed these institutional arrangements constitute central components of a viable movement in the direction of radical democratic egalitarian emancipatory ideals, then the creation of these institutions would be massively opposed by elites whose interests would be threatened by such changes. And so long as capitalism remains the dominant component in the economic structure, those elites will have sufficient power to block or subvert any serious movement along the pathways of social empowerment" (Wright 2010: 273).

It seems natural to assume that the ruling elites will have issues with losing power, something Wright admits. But if this fact was to stop every attempt at social transformation, we would not have moved forward since we first walked out of the caves. This is where the concept of a theory of emancipatory social transformation enters. What this entails is a four-part process, containing four theories: One of social reproduction, one of gaps and contradictions of reproduction, one of trajectories of unintended social change and one of transformative strategies (Wright 2010: 273). These could be connected to a grand narrative of emancipation, seeing



how Wright here attempts to detail a four-part process for change and social emancipation. But what finally pushes it into non-grand narrative territory, is his final result, meaning that even if he strays into grand narrative thinking here, his piece as a whole ultimately ends up not being one. This again show, as mentioned in chapter three, how blurry the lines can be.

"The first of these provides an account of the obstacles to emancipatory transformation. The second shows how, in spite of these obstacles, there are real possibilities of transformation. The third attempts to specify the future prospects of both obstacles and possibilities. And finally, the fourth component attempts to answer the question 'what is to be done?'" (Wright 2010: 273).

The most interesting one is perhaps the fourth one: transformative strategies. Within this one, we get to look at what alternatives for transformation we have available, or at least what Wright perceives as possible transformation trajectories.

Wright proposes three main views of how a system transformation might happen, where two of them involves *metamorphosis*, and one involve the more traditional view of a violent overthrow, or what Wright calls *rupture* (Wright 2010: 303). These approaches represent very different ways of social transformation, with different results, and where ruptural transformation would be the one closely connected with grand narratives and utopian theory, on account of the volatile nature. It is what Marx envisioned, and what has been perhaps associated the most with Marxist and communist ideologies of the last two centuries (at least for critics). The idea of a traditional violent revolution should be well known to most, but a succinct definition is put forth: "Smash first, build second" (Wright 210: 303). This will never be an optimal way of doing things, because of the inherent chaos that will follow and its ramifications on society, seeing how it goes against democratic principles.

On the other hand, you have the view of transformation as metamorphosis. Here you have a version of transformation, with two possibilities: *interstitial* and *symbiotic*, where an "interstitial transformation" tries to find its way into society by way of niches and staying on the outskirts of capitalist society (Wright 2010: 303). These movements are perhaps closest connected to civil society and are often associated with community activists and smaller efforts. Traditionally, these projects have garnered criticism (also from other Marxists) because they operate on a scale that, according to the critics, never will be able to influence change at a higher level. Still, Wright says that this way of working towards social transformation should not be

disregarded straight away, because these efforts could end up with a snowball effect and lead to change in society as whole (Wright 2010: 305).

The alternative, symbiotic transformation, is often connected to a social democratic tradition, and involves both helping the ones in favour of social transformation as well as the already existing system, hence the symbiotic function. An example put forth is the democratization of capitalist states, which led to liberal democracy; as the pressure coming from below actually led to influence, a 'trade-off' had to be made, where the elites also made something off the change (Wright 2010: 305). In table 1, we can see the three models for social transformation, as discussed above, and the trajectory of each approach. As we can see, the three trajectories represent three very different roads towards social transformation. All of these have been tried at some point in history, and if we were to look at the results there is little doubt that the third one, symbiotic metamorphosis, is the one that has seen the most use. The era of Marxist revolutions ended in bloodshed and human misery, not making a good case for future use, and most will probably say that this alternative has been eliminated, because currently you will not find anyone but outlier groups advocating armed revolution in the name of Marx. Nevertheless, according to Wright we should not write it off completely, because there is something to be said for certain elements of ruptural transformation.

#### **4.2.3 Say you want a revolution**

Four arguments stand out in Wright's discussion of the usefulness of ruptural transformation. What this entails is what we can learn from discussing this approach, even as Wright himself says that this kind of revolutionary approach has no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (at least for now). The first argument presented in favour of ruptural transformation has to do with how it might incite political activism, only on a lesser scale than an actual revolution. Second, there is hope that when people see the limits of revolutionary transformation, this will lead to the exploration of other alternatives. Third, we might see more limited forms of ruptural transformation, say in an institutional setting, and fourth: no one knows what the future might bring (Wright 2010: 308/309).

The last point is particularly interesting. As discussed earlier, the idea that another system is going to follow capitalism no matter what, is not uncommon in Marxist theory. No matter how ingrained the current system has become, and however unlikely it might seem that some sort of revolutionary process were to disrupt the current state of affairs, it might be unwise to

completely write it off: "Equilibria unravel. Systemic crises destroy the foundations of hegemony. Ruptures may happen rather than be made, and in such conditions a ruptural strategy may become what Marxists called an 'historical necessity'" (Wright 2010: 309). It is because of this, Wright says, that we should always keep a strategy at hand for such a dramatic turn of events. This is of course a stark view compared to such theories as Fukuyama's *end of history*, with the prediction that it is highly unlikely for an already established liberal democracy to revert into chaos, and perhaps especially unlikely to once again see the rise of a serious revolutionary movement in western liberal democracies.

When it comes to political activism and smaller ruptures within the system, we can once again return to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, mentioned earlier. This is both an example of how political activism could incite further involvement with activism and what could (in a perfect storm) potentially have played out as a smaller ruptural transformation. We did not see the latter this time around, but what it perhaps did lead to, is a renewed interest from young activists in search of contributing to something that might lead to a change. Wright is also clear on that he does not foresee using a violent revolution as means of change. Not only because of the historical development and the current situation in western democracies, but also because he does not see a way in which such an approach would work, as it would be "incapable of actually creating a deeply egalitarian democratic form of social empowerment in developed capitalist societies" (Wright 2010: 310). The undemocratic nature of a ruptural transformation makes it incompatible with Wright's vision.

This leaves only one path, a path where one, at least to some degree, work through the already established, flawed state machinery. This has another positive side effect, namely that you to some degree need support of at least a majority of the people. On the question of socialism, there is a condition in Wright's assumptions about ruptural transformation, one that says that socialism has to be in the material interests of as many people as possible. This is not to say that it needs to take a utilitarian turn, but rather that whichever version of socialism employed needs to take into account the material needs of people. No transformation will gain support if it means having to live with conditions much worse than under capitalism (Wright 2010: 311). This pragmatic way of approaching transformation might be wise, because in the approach discussed here, where the involvement of the people is key, you need to convince even the more sceptical ones that a change in society is not going to lead to a dramatic negative change in their lives.

#### **4.2.4 Is ruptural change possible?**

Wright lays out some possible paths for what would happen to a society in the event of undergoing a ruptural socialist transformation, and on all accounts, the results are not great. If we carry on the democratic condition mentioned above as a rule, it is unlikely that a ruptural transformation would be possible; the political support would not be there, which will then most likely lead to either abandonment of the project, or as we have seen so many times before, a shift towards undemocratic methods. The rise of the one-party, authoritarian, system is one that the history books are chock full of, and Wright doubts that one could end up with something resembling an egalitarian society after such an event (Wright 2010: 318).

Thus, according to Wright, the idea of a ruptural transformation needs to be put down. It is a path that only leads down an already tried and failed road, and at this point, it works only as an obstacle for meaningful discussion and the development of other solutions. If we are going to find new ways for social empowerment, we have to start looking elsewhere. And that place might be within the already existing capitalist system (Wright 2010: 320).

#### **4.2.5 Change from within**

This brings us to the second form of transformation: interstitial transformation. Since Wright has abandoned the path of ruptural transformation, he now looks towards solutions that work with the angle of changing the already existing system from within.

Unfortunately, this mode of transformation also leaves something to be desired. Interstitial change entails smaller transformations (often grassroots) gaining momentum, growing bigger, and then ending up cumulating enough force to eventually cause larger shifts: a metamorphosis (Wright 2010: 321). Interstitial transformation does not necessarily happen without some sort of friction with the already established system, and as with ruptural transformation, there will be a "losing part, meaning the elites and the powerful, who will see their power dwindling. Certain elements of ruptural theory will therefore be a necessary part of this transformation. The metamorphosis will still entail a struggle between the powerful and the grassroots, but as opposed to the abrupt and volatile mood of the ruptural transformation, the interstitial transformation moves towards the future egalitarian society by way of gradually modifying the system structures of a society and the mechanisms of social reproduction. In time, these gradual changes will transform the system in a way that feels more natural, since the changes have been

ingrained in the system from the bottom up and over time, rather than as a violent confrontation between classes and interest groups (Wright 2010: 321).

We can further split this metamorphosis approach into two: interstitial and symbiotic, the main difference being their relationship to the state. As briefly discussed, interstitial being mainly grassroots activists, they usually do not have very much to do with the state and largely bypasses it. Symbiotic strategies on the other hand, works with the structures provided by the state to further their work with changes towards emancipatory social changes (Wright 2010: 322). These two different ways of looking at the state leads to people in the interstitial camp being sceptical towards those advocating symbiotic strategies, and vice versa.

#### **4.2.6 Do interstitial strategies work?**

As we saw with ruptural transformations, interstitial strategies, although mostly free of bloodshed, end up failing because they are perhaps too weak when it comes to the amount of influence it can have on a system. While these activists themselves tend to work outside the already established system, distancing themselves from the capitalist modes of operation, there is no indication that this will be enough to convince others of joining. They might raise awareness about social empowerment and the egalitarian movements, but it is not very likely that it will succeed to "erode the basic structural power of capital sufficiently to dissolve the capitalist limits on emancipatory social change" (Wright 2010: 335).

Neither the way traditional anarchists nor revolutionary anarchists look at the state helps the case for emancipatory changes through interstitial strategies. The first considers the state to be without cracks in which one is to sow the seed of change, and therefore to be avoided, while the latter sees it as roadblock, something that needs to be removed by rupture. Both of these polarizing views fail to see the state as it is: neither unitary nor impenetrable, or a pure system in place only to keep capitalism surviving (Wright 2010: 336). Wright think that ignoring the state therefore leads nowhere in the chase for emancipatory social change, and end up with only one final alternative: *symbiotic transformation*.

#### **4.2.7 Working with the state**

Symbiotic transformation, the last of the three transformation trajectories put forth by Wright; seeks to change the system by social empowerment from the bottom-up, within the already

existing capitalist system. This gives it legitimacy, especially if it also manages to help not only those on the bottom of the movement, but also the ones at the top. As formulated by Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streeck when explaining the success of social democracy (the "democratic left"):

"The democratic left makes progress under capitalism when it improves the material well-being of workers, solves a problem for capitalists that capitalists cannot solve for themselves, and in doing both wins sufficient political cachet to contest capitalist monopoly on articulating the 'general interests'" (Rogers and Streeck 1994: 130).

This way of working towards social empowerment makes it better institutionalized, especially when the powerful also see benefits, making it more resistant to backlashes from that same group. We can find many examples of this class compromise within developed capitalist countries in the latter part of the twentieth century, perhaps especially when looking at the Scandinavian countries (Wright 2010: 338).

#### **4.2.8 Worker-owned corporative**

One way of looking at Wright's attempt at moving from theoretical thought experiments and into reality, is what Ernest Bloch calls *docta spes* (or educated hope), the act of moving from something within the realm of fantasy to the possible (Levitas 2007: 295). He presents a view in which the move from one to another is a process, both parts being important. Looking at Wright, we can recognise similarities, and an example of 'educated hope' in this setting is the idea of another form of participatory democracy, by way of direct democracy, or deliberate democracy (here represented by James Fishkin), which is one of Wright's examples of real utopias.

Deliberative democracy wishes to achieve better involvement, where participants not just vote, but actually motivating people to think more about the issues at hand (Fishkin 2009: 1). To Wright, an empowering entails strengthening the power of the people and one way to achieve this is by letting people have a better saying in decisions that affect their fate. This he calls "empowered participatory governance" (Wright 2010: 155). Here we are acquainted with one of Wright's examples of "real utopias": the municipal budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, which was executed with heavy participation from its citizens. This system of participatory budgeting is a step towards increasing citizen involvement in the decision making that immediately affects their daily life. But if citizen involvement is going to be strengthened, there are some obstacles that needs to be worked out, because direct democracy has not been an achievable alternative

for quite a long time. As a result of the degree of professionalization of politicians, demanding high involvement from participants, representative systems have edged out direct democracy. Nevertheless, Wright believes that direct democracy is one of the ways that social empowerment might happen (Wright 2010: 155).

This example of empowered participatory governance checks multiple boxes of what Wright describes as crucial for social emancipation. It has resulted in more money spent on the poorest neighbourhoods, a rise in the participation ratio of citizens, better stimulation of civil society, less corruption and more transparency, all while support for the Workers' Party increased and remained stable, something that is unusual for left wing parties in poorer countries. Wright also points to an increase in tax compliance amongst the middle and affluent classes (Wright 2010: 158-159). However, as Wright himself points out, this is an isolated case and there is no evidence that it would work if it were tried at other locations. Still, what was the evidence of it working in Porto Alegre before it was introduced there? By using this example of empowered participatory governance, Wright has identified certain key elements of what such a democratic institution might entail.

As mentioned when discussing transformation theories, the bottom-up empowered participation is crucial. In a functioning empowered participatory governance system, "bottom-up participation" differs from the participation people have in a representative democracy, because it is something more than the voter only expressing his views and voting for his representative. Instead, it means that the citizens participate in the decision-making (Wright 2010: 161), which means that one often needs to possess a pragmatic orientation, making sure that people who have conflicts of interests has to put those aside in order to take care of more immediate problems. The problem then becomes how we are supposed to approach radical issues with sharply defined conflicts of interests. While Wright recognizes this issue, he still hopes that the increase in citizen involvement will lead to a gradual shift in the approach to such issues. Another hope is that it will lead to an awakening in the political interests, and the combination of these two will stand for what he calls a "deepening of democracy" (Wright 2010). The idea is that the right solution can be reached through a Habermasian ideal of good argumentation, hopefully forcing the participants to make decisions based on proper reasoning (Wright 2010: 163).

A "deepening of democracy" involves a decentralization of power, moving decision-making power down to local units. What this entails is a redistribution of both power and responsibility; the local powers would be held responsible in the same way that current power holders are,

since both would have the same kind of public authority (Wright 2010: 163). This last point is a crucial one, because in an event of radical power redistribution and institutional change, there will still be a need to keep people accountable. To some degree, this is covered by "recombinant decentralization" (Wright 2010: 163), an interplay between the decentralized power and central authority, and thus a middle way between ordinary hierarchical top-heavy authority and a flat out anarchist system. In this system, the central power would participate by supporting the local, deliberative entities, and helping to keep them accountable (Wright 2010: 164).

An aspect of modern democratic theory, as pointed out by Carole Pateman in her 1970 work *Participation and Democratic Theory*, the lack of discussion owing to "the myth of the 'classical doctrine of democracy' propagated so successfully by Schumpeter" (Pateman 1970: 103). Here she references Joseph Schumpeter's idea that one need to come to term with only choosing ones representatives and letting them decide, abandon all ideas of a direct approach. This has led to what she perceives as academic orthodoxy on the subject and has hindered a thorough look at the theories of participatory democracy. Because of this, participatory theories have been left out of the equation and as a result, prevailing theories of democracy has not been subjected to enough criticism (Pateman 1970: 103). What Wright tries to do some forty years later carries certain similarities to Pateman's argument, and with the example of Porto Alegre he resumes the argument where Pateman left off. With the real-life example of participatory democracy where the people have moved a step up from only being part of the electoral machinery, not only there to pick the next ruling elite (representative democracy). With this, Wright moves the debate towards where Pateman meant it should be, against the grain of what she calls a one-sided debate. As Fukuyama was to point out even further years later, Pateman points out how an Anglo-American political system has become the standard, ideal democratic system. The ironic side of this is that it shows similarities to anti-democratic arguments.

"No longer is democratic theory centred on the participation of 'the people', on the participation of the ordinary man [...] in the contemporary theory of democracy it is the participation of the minority élite that is crucial and the non-participation of the apathetic, ordinary man lacking in the feeling of political efficacy that is regarded as the main bulwark against instability" (Pateman 1970: 104).

As Pateman points out, it should not come as a shock that the "ordinary man" feels apathy towards a system that invokes feelings of hopelessness. The classical doctrine, as proposed by Schumpeter, is at times detrimental to the development of a system in which participation from people goes further than only voting for their representative. For Schumpeter, leadership were



the important aspect of a democracy and he saw any attempt from citizens, other than voting and discussion, as a negative attempt to control leaders (Pateman 1970: 5). Schumpeter saw the political elite as the important part, and in his work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943) he brushes aside the current system and voters as "the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede" (Schumpeter 1976: 283). A lot has changed in the world since Schumpeter wrote his work, but one thing that we see, is the ever-growing professionalization and elite characterisation of modern politics. Politicians tend to be lawyers, MBAs and you have hints of what could be described as political dynasties (i.e. the Bush family or the Clintons), and in this sense there is a gap between the "ordinary man" and the people at the top. In that case, an attempt at moving it towards a system of greater participation from people should perhaps be seen as the next logical step, if we are to avoid an even greater alienation from the ones feeling left out and helpless against the elite system.

Participatory democracy is nothing new and Pateman mentions, amongst others, one thinker that we shall dwell on for a second: G.D.H. Cole. Cole was a liberal socialist and developer of the movement *guild socialism* (Pateman 1970: 35). Cole developed a system that is similar to Wright's example of the worker-owned cooperative Mondragón (Wright 2010: 240). Cole followed Marx in his view of the capitalist tendency to turn labour into a commodity, denying the work its 'humanity'. Of this *guild socialism* was born, a system where equality of opportunity and status were put first (Pateman 1970: 39), and only through this could participation be fully realised. What Cole wanted to achieve was a learning process, where, by being given the chance to participate on the local level (the industry), it would allow the people to "learn the ropes of democracy," so to speak. The argument was that the worker was to set himself free (Cole saw the worker-employee relationship as a form of slavery), because the only thing this relationship had done for the workers was to make them "trained to subservience" (Pateman 1970: 38), and only through taking over production and erasing the dividing line between worker and manager could this be achieved. Cole thought that the submissiveness in the industry translated to politics, making *guild socialism* so important for him in order to educate the workers.

With the example of Mondragón, Wright picks up on this line of reasoning. The idea of worker-owned cooperatives is perhaps the closest one could get to the idea of owners owning their own means of production, at least on a larger scale. What defines a worker cooperative is that the employees fully own it and the members govern it democratically (with varying principles of execution) (Wright 2010: 238). As of now, the number of companies that follow these principles are few and they do not account for a significant amount of total revenue, especially because of

the difficulty of entering the highly competitive capitalist market, but they still play a part and represent an alternative to the established system.

To do this, Wright uses one of the most successful examples, the Mondragón cooperatives, hailing from the Basque city of the same name. Mondragón consist of multiple owner-worked enterprises that together form an organisation taking care of the needs of the companies, making them better suited to step into the global market. With principles of solidarity laid down as foundation, the companies within the cooperative take care of each other. They do this by distributing revenue from the highest grossing to those experiencing difficulties, in effect creating a kind of cooperative market economy (Wright 2010: 241), creating a protecting sphere where the overarching structure protects the singular companies from the outside forces of the capitalist market.

There are of course tensions within the organisation, and one might wonder how it is going to fare against the ever-pounding fists of the capitalist system outside its doors. But what we are witnessing is nonetheless a successful attempt at a worker-means of production relationship that could serve as an example of a healthier outlook on how production could be organised. So far they exist within the realm of the capitalist system, and this leads to certain challenges, especially with regards to expansion (Mondragón has shown hostility towards trade unions in their foreign acquirement). However, Wright states: "Rather than attempting to specify the design for the final destination, the strategy is to examine specific mechanisms which move in the right direction" (Wright 2010: 246), and in that sentiment, Mondragón represents a model that could be developed further.

#### **4.2.9 Our last hope?**

As we stand facing the last of the three transformation theories, with the other two having been discontinued, the question arises: will this one hold with regards to success in the real world? The two others having been discarded on the basis on being either too violent, and the latter not being influential enough. What we have left, symbiotic transformation, the act of bottom-up change (with a close-knit relationship with also those that not necessary agree on the ideological level) is not without its flaws. As with interstitial transformation, there is evidence that the work done by those subscribed to symbiotic strategies is having an effect on the system, seeing that there is actually some co-operation between otherwise opposing classes. There is however a long way to go from there to total system transformation. Why, asks Wright, does this strategy

have any better chance of achieving social emancipation than the other two? The answer is (disheartening) that it does not.

Because although symbiotic strategies have created some positive collaborations with capitalism, for instance the labour movements position in the welfare state, the capitalist system still remains the de facto system. Perhaps almost stronger and more legitimate through this cooperation with the left. "As was the case for ruptural strategies and for interstitial strategies, therefore, it is difficult to make an abstract case that symbiotic strategies provide a basis for social transformation beyond capitalism" (Wright 2010: 364).

#### **4.2.10 Wouldn't it be nice?**

With the rather disheartening conclusion above, we are back where we started. Ruptural transformation is for obvious reasons off the table. Although it is probably the one approach able to create an all-encompassing system transformation, its violent nature and lack of legitimacy and support from non-revolutionary groups makes it unsuitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And with both interstitial and symbiotic transformation lacking in the influence department, we are left once again staring into an uncertain future.

This should not come as a surprise, because it would be too optimistic to think that one book would find the solution to what humankind has been searching after ever since the Greek philosophers first laid out their plans for the ideal state. Wright leaves us with two predictions for the future, choosing which one to place one's faith in depends on one's worldview. The first one corresponds with Fukuyama's 'end of history' theory and has the pessimistic view that capitalism is here to stay, at least for now.

"[...]this condition is our fate, living in a world in which capitalism remains hegemonic: systemic ruptures for a democratic egalitarian alternative to capitalism are extremely unlikely to ever muster mass popular support within developed capitalist democracies; interstitial transformations are limited to restricted spaces, and symbiotic strategies, when they are successful, strengthen the hegemonic capacity of capitalism" (Wright 2010: 364-365).

The other outcome, although clichéd as it might seem, is that no one knows what the future holds. What the work laid down today, by groups working with interstitial and symbiotic strategies, might amount to down the road is not something we can decide now. Perhaps

interstitial work done today will lead to a newfound support around the idea of system change or perhaps the symbiotic supporters will make cracks in the current system, large enough for interstitial ideas to find room and slowly change the system from within, every day moving closer and closer towards an egalitarian society (Wright 2010: 365).

But all of this, no matter which side you belong to, is pure speculation, and in that way nothing is more true than that we do not know what the future might hold. The world has seen radical changes before, regimes has risen and fallen. Still, capitalism has become so ingrained in the western world that to see its demise seems impossible. Then again, stranger things have happened.



## Chapter 5 – Discussion

In the discussion, the results of the analysis will be presented and we will take a look at how Wright's theories fit in with the theories of chapter three. First, his position within the realm of grand narratives will be discussed, before moving onto the role of Utopia. This discussion of utopian thinking is there to show how the relationship between those who are sceptical towards grand narratives and utopian thinking, and those who sees it as an essential part of political theory. The idea is that perhaps it is not so simple as to say that postmodernism has become the only alternative, rendering grand narratives and Utopia obsolete; rather that postmodernism is only one of many ways to interpret the world.

### **5.1 Does Wright propose a grand narrative?**

What results are we left with after having been through Wright's work? If we apply the framework laid down in chapter three, some observations stand out.

First, if we look at author intent, Wright in his introduction establishes that he wants to stay away from what he calls grand designs (Wright 2010: x). This follows the thought process of what real utopias should be, and if Wright had said anything else in his introduction, his project might have been discarded already at that point. As we can see in amongst both chapter 1.1.3 and 4.1.1, Wright directly states that he is not interested in creating a grand design. This point towards Wright not engaging with a grand narrative vision, on account on how his book (while at times moving between the lines of grand narrative and non-grand narrative theory) ultimately ends up without an answer.

Then what of the relationship to the grand narrative theory as presented through Lyotard and Malpas? The criteria of grand narratives of emancipation, as mentioned in chapter three, is interesting, because it is here that we could find signs of Wright's work having characteristics of a grand narrative. A grand narrative of emancipation, at the basic level, entails an attempt to free mankind from oppression and ignorance (Lyotard 1984: 36). While the definition proposed by Lyotard focuses on mysticism and dogma, one could argue that capitalism is the belief system that accounts for today's oppression. The fragmented capitalist world, which promotes the everlasting chase after commodities and status, thinly veiled as personal development, might be something that needs to be exposed to achieve actual human development. Perhaps the dollar could be called the modern idol? If we accept this premise, what Wright tries to achieve with his examples of citizen participation in budgeting in Brazil and worker owned corporations in

Basque, is to show how informing people about alternatives can lead to a bettering of their situation. What Wright does, is illuminate a possible way out of the dark valley of capitalism, by urging people to act. To go along with his real utopias he lays out a hefty critique of the current capitalist system, pointing out flaws within today's structures to the audience. As he says in the introduction, the book started out as a work aimed at the popular audience. "I somehow hoped that I could deal seriously with these difficult theoretical and political matters and still make the books accessible and attractive to people not schooled in radical social theory or Marxism" (Wright 2010: xvii). This attempt to reach beyond academics and those who already follows Marxist thoughts is an ideal about igniting interest amongst those not in the know about current state of affairs and what could be done to better them. In this sense, Wright moves within the borders of what constitutes a grand narrative of emancipation.

But here we encounter the problem of uncertainty when working with questions like this. Yes, Wright might show some signs that could be interpreted as a him having a theory of a grand narrative of emancipation. At the same time, if this should be called a grand narrative, is not capitalism or critiques of Marxism just as much a grand narrative? This difficulty makes treading in this landscape tricky, seeing how much intertwining there can be between sides.

Therefore, this paper proposes one defining feature of Wright's work that shows him not offering a grand narrative theory, which is his self-awareness regarding the position of socialism and the possibility of creating a radical shift towards an egalitarian society. Throughout his entire work, he keeps his focus on the democratic aspect of a transformation, staying away from advocating ruptural transformations on account of them never keeping democratic principles alive. Another crucial aspect that helps cement Wright's theory as a non-grand narrative is how he ends the book with no call to arms, but rather a sombre admission of the bleak prospect of change. The fact that he acknowledges the hopelessness of the situation, and no good way out, makes it so that no one can accuse him of being a revolutionary or grand designer, and maybe that is what ultimately ends up holding his theories back.

As mentioned in the end of the last chapter, the most striking part of Wright's theories is what might be seen as a lack of faith in the idea of a transformation of society towards a socialistic system. His book sets out to find a way for social emancipation to take place, but in the end it might look like the road leading there is steeper than anticipated. Still, he is not the first to come to the journey's end, finding that what he set out to discover turning out to be a mirage. Where does this leave us? For one thing, perhaps the postmodernist view is not the only game in town after all.

Douglas Kellner (1988) puts forth some critical points about postmodern social theory that should be mentioned. On Lyotard's theories, he writes

"[...] there isn't really too much social critique in Lyotard. His focus – like much poststructural and postmodernist theory – is on critique of metatheory, philosophy and knowledge. Consequently, as a social theory, Lyotard's theory and critique are underdeveloped and do not really provide much of a critical theory of society" (Kellner 1988: 257).

Kellner is not entirely convinced by the postmodern argument, and argues that they might be exaggerating the ruptural break and playing down the fact that there is a lot of continuity from earlier stages of development (Kellner 1988: 267). He calls for a new understanding of the continued vitality and destructiveness of capitalism, where postmodernism is viewed as a representative of techno-capitalism, a combination of new technology and capitalism. "This move points to continuities with the social theories of the past (i.e. Marxism) and the need to revive, update, expand and develop previous theories in the light of contemporary conditions." (Kellner 1988: 267) This could be applied to Wright's attempt to update Marxist and utopian theories to better analyse the current situation. This also shows how postmodern theory is by no means the only way to view today's society, and might even be damaging to the debate.

"Theories of techno-capitalism would also allow specification of a radical politics as both anti-capitalist and cognizant of new technologies, social movements and political challenges. Radical politics could thus be at once macro and micro, and concerned to provide links between existing radical movements and to demonstrate the links between the existing problems of the present age. For utopia and catastrophe are both part of the postmodern scene and if hope in a better future is to be rationally justified it must be grounded in a theory of both the possibilities and dangers of the present age." (Kellner 1988: 268)

What Kellner points out here is another approach towards the situation of the postmodern society. He suggests that merging capitalism and technology makes for an analysis that to a greater extent places the development within a historical frame, not so much looking at it as a clean break, as postmodernists often do. This shows that the postmodern approach might not be the only way after all, and that there still are lines connecting us to the historical development. Thus, utopia might be attainable after all.



## 5.2 Utopia after all?

Finally, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, no matter how much one might have hoped for Wright to deliver unto us a new and never before seen solution to the problems of capitalism, ends on a rather disheartening tone. As it turns out, Wright does not seem to have the answers we are looking for.

"Capitalism will survive, for the foreseeable future anyway. The disruptions following the economic crisis which began in 2008 may cause great suffering to many people, and the disastrous effects of the mania for deregulating markets may reveal the irrationalities of capitalism, but suffering and irrationality are never enough to generate fundamental social transformations." (Wright 2010: 366)

If not suffering and irrationality is enough to cause radical social change, one might wonder what is, but it is with these words that Wright concludes his work. To him, it does not seem possible that capitalism will lose its current position, having become the only seemingly realistic way of system organisation, at least when looking at it purely from an economic point of view. There are of course systems like the Scandinavian social democracies, where the left has found a way to work together with the capitalists, merging social concerns with a market economy. But these countries are not fundamentally emancipated from capitalism. However, that is not to say that Wright does not contribute anything to the discourse surrounding social emancipation. If not a solution, he still provides some useful commentary on the situation and he attempts to put forth useful alternatives.

The first, and perhaps most important argument, is that as long as capitalism is the default economic organisation, it will block attempts to propel social justice and political justice further towards social emancipation. What Wright means by this, is that capitalism by default is an unfair system, where power and inequality are the driving forces behind it (Wright 2010: 366). It is a system that relies on keeping the consumers always wanting more, and keeping workers in a limbo where they know that one is always replaceable and therefore must be willing to accept the terms of the owners of production. Combine this with Marx's concept of alienation and you have a system designed to lay obstacles in the way of human development. However, this is only one point of view, and to lay all blame for human misery and injustice on capitalism is perhaps a stretch, but nevertheless "it does imply that the struggle for human emancipation requires a struggle against capitalism, not simply a struggle within capitalism" (Wright 2010: 367). If we use John Rawls's theory of the *veil of ignorance*, it is difficult to find arguments for

choosing capitalism as the best form of economic organisation. With the odds of coming out on the losing side, no one would voluntarily choose a system rife with possibilities for power and economic imbalance. The problem for the real world is of course that someone already is on top, which will mean that someone already is next in line for inheriting that power, and the carousel turns once again, nothing having changed.

Another thing to consider is the hybrid nature of economic structures, because no state is running a pure form of economic organisation. Speaking of truly capitalist or socialist economic structures is impossible when discussing real life examples, because of the inherent hybridity of economic systems. When a system is identified as capitalist, it means that capitalism is the dominant form of power. Therefore, when thinking of creating an emancipatory transformation shift, this should not be viewed "mainly as a binary shift from one system to another, but rather as a shift in the configuration of the power relations that constitute a hybrid" (Wright 2010: 367). Viewed this way, the task at hand might not seem so monumental, since Wright with his examples moves within the existing system.

While working with democracy in mind has been one of the crucial rules for Wright's search in transcending capitalism (this is why he dismissed ruptural strategies) (Wright 2010: 318-320), there are certain aspects of today's structure that is bordering on undemocratic: the relationship between economic power and social power, and the one between means of production and labour. If we follow the argumentation from above, the shift in the current system should therefore mean an end to the subordination of the working class to the capitalists (Wright 2010: 368). If this were to happen, one could start talking about an egalitarian shift within the current system. Combine this with the real life examples given, and you might be looking at something that could help change the power balance in favour of a socialistic outcome.

At the same time, it is important to remember that nothing about the future is predictable. Socialism is no guarantee for creating a system containing those ideals, as much as it might provide a framework for working towards such goals. Wright states that social and political justice, requires that "all people have equal access to the necessary social and material means to live flourishing lives; political justice entails that all people have equal access to the political means to participate in decisions that affect their lives" (Wright 2010: 368-369). Something that is not present if we follow Wright's critique of capitalism. Wright regards socialism as the control of allocation and use of the means of production being decided by a socialist democratic power (Wright 2010: 369), and while this does not guarantee social and political justice, it

would hopefully create a better platform for which on to work towards justice. This leaves the presumption that democracy will lead to rightful actions.

"The argument for socialism [...] rests on [...] the belief that the more democratic the distribution of power is in a system the more likely it is that humane and egalitarian values will prevail. This presupposes not a belief in the innate goodness of people, but rather the belief that under conditions of a wide and deep democracy people will interact in ways in which the more humane impulses of our nature are more likely to prevail. But democracy can be hijacked. Exclusionary solidarities can be fostered as well as universalistic one. There are no guarantees." (Wright 2010: 369)

As there is no way to control how humans act, there will always be an element of uncertainty, and therefore one has to hope that the right choices will be made, because no institutional structure is designed well enough for it to control itself.

In the end, the demise of capitalism seems unlikely, and Wright throws out Marx's theory of the laws of motion within capitalism. It is a sombre conclusion to the book, a work that set out with the intent of finding a way for social egalitarianism to find its footing in a world that sees an increasing gap in how wealth is divided and a capitalist system that has been through severe crises, the latest in 2008. In the end, it might seem like we have passed the point of no return, and with the idea of a democratic process being crucial for the development of a socialist system, there might never come a big enough momentum to move the balance in favour of a socialist egalitarian movement. "The best we can do might be to try to neutralize some of the most harmful effects of capitalism. In spite of the will there might be no way. That could be true." (Wright 2010: 372) The problem is unsurprisingly that there is a complexity related to realising a system transformation. As the entire discussion surrounding ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic strategies has shown, there is no easy solution, and to know the consequences of major changes is impossible.

Wright leaves us with a plea not to take this as a dismissal of the fight towards social emancipation, because he leaves the book as he entered it: as a staunch defender of socialist principles and with the belief that change might be possible. But the path to reach it is not clear and therefore any move has to be taken with utmost care. He suggests that we continue to push the limits of transformation and "in doing so we not only envision real utopias, but contribute to making utopias real." (Wright 2010: 373) The question that remains is whether this is enough, as capitalism does not seem to lose its grip, at least not yet. And, although we see people taking

a stand against consumerism with interstitial efforts such as through an increase in focus on ethical made products, locally sourced food etc., the locally sourced broccoli is not the thing that will overthrow capitalism. But maybe it could be the first step getting there.

### 5.3 The necessity of Utopia

Another way to look at Wright is in the light of what utopia's role in modern political theory is (if any), whom Ruth Levitas has been an ardent defender of. Tied in with the postmodern view of utopia as something horribly anachronistic, utopian thinking seems to have fallen out of favour with political theorists. Still, utopia is not distrusted only in recent times, but even with the likes of Marx and Engels, who criticised the concept of Utopia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Fourier, himself branded a Utopian Socialist, described Utopia like this:

"What is Utopia? It is the dream of well-being without the means of execution without an effective method. Thus, all philosophical sciences are Utopias, for they have always led people to the very opposite of the state of well-being they promised them."  
(Geoghegan 1987: 17)

However, Levitas, continues to defend Utopia's place within political theory in her 2007 paper "Looking for the blue: The necessity of utopias". In the opening paragraph, she mentions a definition of the differences between ideology and utopian thinking from one of the founders of sociology, Karl Mannheim, who put ideology and utopia as two opposites, where "ideology serving to retain the *status quo* and utopia serving to transform it" (Mannheim 1997: 36). What we then might have to do, Levitas suggests, is to view utopia through two separate formulations: "Looking for the blue and looking for the green" (Levitas 2007: 290). The existential quest for Utopia, Levitas writes, shows that utopias have value to contemporary ideology, "if 'ideology' is understood in its general sense of culture or belief system rather than its critical and evaluative sense" (Levitas 2007: 290). In this sense, the utopian quality is something inherent in a lot of culture, a longing manifesting itself in artistic expressions. It is a refusal, a refusal to settle and to say that what we are given is as good as it gets (Levitas 2007: 294). Even Lenin, following in a Marxist tradition that (as seen) does not look too kindly on fantasies, says that there is value to be found in dreaming about the future. "If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well [...] of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little of in our movement" (Lenin 1975: 211).

Wright follows in the footsteps of one of the great thinkers regarding utopia, Ernest Bloch, in the sense of that in order for utopia to have value, abstract utopia needs to be regarded as only the beginning. It needs to go from wishful to "will-full" (Levitas 2007: 291), or in the spirit of Wright, it needs to become 'real'. This means moving away from the obvious connotations surrounding utopias, because there is no getting away from the fact that dreaming about the future has been, and will probably be for centuries to come, an essential part of human existence.

"The *not yet* – carrying the double sense of not *yet* (but expected, a future presence) and still *not* (a current absence and lack) – is a central concept. The not yet operates at two levels: the level of individuals as not the not-yet-conscious, the essentially creative preconscious utopian impulse, that which is on the verge of becoming to consciousness; and at the level of the objective world – the not-yet-become" (Levitas 2007: 291).

And the possibilities for future change is a part of reality, according to Bloch. Utopia is not to be viewed as something arcane, but as forward dreaming, or as Bloch calls it, the production of the future, where "the hinge in human history is its producers" (Bloch 1986: 5). This is crucial if any change is to take place, no matter what.

Levitas always acknowledges the challenged position of utopian thought in the current climate of political thinking. The Cold War 'thesis' of "Utopia = Totalitarianism = Communism = Marxism = Socialism and 'Communism = Totalitarianism = Fascism'" (Levitas 2007: 297) still rings true for many, and what developed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is what could be described as a "war on ideologies", propelled by thinkers such as Karl Popper and Hannah Arendt (Jacoby 2005: 50). As they witnessed and lived through what Nazi Germany did to Europe during WW2, it might not come as a surprise that they became sceptical towards grand ideas. The result was the evolution of a political climate where ideology is almost used as a swear word to accuse opponents. Karl Popper is a target for criticism because of his influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking, and is accused of influencing a way of "thinking about the future that is essentially one of extrapolation accompanied by crisis management and troubleshooting" (Levitas 2007: 300). This might be safer, as it protects the system from radical changes that might prove catastrophic (as Popper saw in Germany). But this is relying on the account that the current system is deemed acceptable, and the capitalist 'winners' of the current society is profiting of the idea that socialism is proved unfit by pointing to the regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Levitas points towards another feature of contemporary political discourse: the use of pragmatism to create what is defined as 'anti-utopian utopianism' (Levitas 2007: 298). She

thinks that pragmatism becomes sort of an excuse to hide behind, where being pragmatic (rather than ideological) is viewed as the correct form of discourse and challengers might be brushed aside as utopian, thereby putting one's own views beyond criticism. As an example, Levitas puts forth American foreign policy in the wake of 9/11, where the rise of the "war on terror" created a very defined dichotomy of "us" versus "them". Here, ideology is something in possession by the attackers, one incompatible with the western world, and is therefore a negative attribute; at the same time the American view on what constitutes a desirable way of life is just as much an ideology and utopian thinking, phrased otherwise as "self-denying utopianism" (Levitas 2007: 298). This is a problem, because it ends up sabotaging political discourse by not taking utopianism seriously, thereby leaving out what could have been valuable contributions. You could always call it the "imaginary reconstitution of society" if you want to avoid utopian connotations, but the point is still the same: there needs to be a radical change in imagining the future (Levitas 200: 300), seen as a tool, not necessarily a blueprint to be followed slavishly.

If Marx thought that utopian thinking did not have a place within his project, there are later thinkers that feel there should be more of it in the Marxist school of thought, one of these being Edward Thompson. In his book on the early socialist and writer William Morris, he finishes with a discussion on Morris as a Marxist and utopian, outlining the importance of the utopian part of the combination and to "not allow either a hyphen or a sense of contradiction to enter between the two terms. Above all, the second term may not be reduced to the first." (Thompson 1977: 791) To Morris, the second part is essential to the equation and he goes on to criticise the "scientific" branding that Marx was interested in labelling his approach. Thompson says the problem with this approach is the lack of imagination, and Thompson's critique of Marxism is based on

"[...] the whole problem of the subordination of the imaginative utopian faculties within the later Marxist tradition: its lack of a moral self-consciousness or even a vocabulary of desire, its inability to project any images of the future, or even its tendency to fall back in lieu of these upon the Utilitarian's earthly paradise – the maximisation of economic growth." (Thompson 1977: 792)

What Thompson wrote in 1977 seems to be a foreshadowing of the development of the world in the wake of the Cold War, where the left, in order to be taken seriously, "settled" with the fact that capitalism is the default system. It is this hurdle that seems to be the biggest one amongst most proponents of utopia, and as we saw, is also what Wright struggles with and

where his theories perhaps fails. As we saw in his models of transformation, he hints towards how ruptural change might be the only one that has a chance of transforming the ground rules of a society, but at the cost of democracy and citizens' safety from totalitarian regimes and violence. Whereas symbiotic and interstitial might end up falling short. But this failure is still better than not trying, at least according to Levitas. What utopian thinking does is showing us ways to think radically different about what the future might entail and how to work towards it. She points towards Bertolt Brecht (a proud Marxist), whose didactic plays were written to invoke self-reflection and critical thought amongst the audience. "Utopia in this sense, utopia at is best, is a necessary failure, but will fail us less than its absence," she says. "Of this kind of failure, there is unfortunately too little at the moment." (Levitas 2007: 304) This, at least, we can be certain of. Utopias play a part, and should always be a part of political theory, because mankind can always better itself, and to that someone needs to dare to dream, failure or not.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

In the end, does it really matter where Wright falls on the spectrum of grand narrative theory and postmodernist thinking surrounding structural change? As for Wright himself, he states in the final chapters of *Envisioning Real Utopias*, that even after having worked through close to 400 pages of ideas of social transformation, not even he could envision a way for it to actually happen in a democratic way (since another October Revolution is out of the question).

In the death throes of writing this paper, the world got exposed to what was to be known as the "Panama Papers", a data leak which exposed the tax evasion done by, among others, several heads of state and businesses. When we look at situations like this, it only makes it painfully clear that the search for transformation of current state of affairs is as needed as it ever was. And I argue that this is what Wright searches for in *Envisioning Real Utopias*: a way to change a system that is obviously flawed, but at the same time one that manages to maintain its grasp on the world with no seemingly contestant to the throne. One can see why many of those who favours an utopian approach towards social change end up in the outskirts, or what Wright calls interstitial metamorphosis. Heren we find the people who are tired, the punk rockers of political thought, ready to face the system as we know it and fed up with the current state of affairs. They start out with a lot of energy and, for a while, it might seem like progress is being made. Unfortunately, just as punk rock itself, it ends up fizzling out, or engulfed by capitalism, or not wanting to have anything to do with the mainstream. People see a battle that seems futile, and end up isolating themselves in niche societies where they are depriving themselves of the possibilities of changing the situation, content with standing outside. The only way to win is not to play the game, or at least so it seems.

### 6.1 Findings

This paper seek out to analyse Wright's theories in light of postmodern theory regarding grand narrative theory. After first developing a framework for identifying grand narratives, Wright's theories were put to the test. By abandoning ruptural transformation as a possibility, on account of it not being compatible with democracy, Wright positions himself outside what might be seen as the traditional world of grand narratives. Throughout *Envisioning Real Utopias*, his focus stays on realistic options and he attempts to work within the already established capitalist system (no matter how many flaws he thinks it contains), making him distancing himself from



what he calls "grand designs". This, combined with a somewhat pessimistic conclusion of the possibility of change, makes his theories not fall within grand narrative theory.

Wright's theories of emancipation, as explored in this paper, have the goal of exploring ways for the current system to change towards something more akin to a socialist system, with a heavy interest in raising peoples involvement with their own destiny and ability to change the system from the bottom-up. Therefore, one might perhaps argue that the similarities to grand narratives of emancipation are there, since the entire book works toward showing ways to achieve release from a system deemed unfit for all other than the ones at the top of the food chain. Still, on account of Wright's self-awareness and pessimistic conclusion, we place him outside the grand narrative tradition.

In regards to what could be described as an the inherent fear of grand narratives in postmodern thinking and society, as they have been seen in connection with misjudged attempts of social transformations observed in the last century, Wright makes it very clear that he does not consider revolution an option that retains the integrity of a democratic system. If any other conclusion was reached, all we would have is another manifest of a revolutionary, something that does not lack from either side of the political spectrum. But at the same time this conclusion, coupled with the final paragraphs of *Envisioning Real Utopias*, make it seem like the era of grand narratives are over. And the reason might seem to be not be growing suspicion among people "enlightened" by postmodernism, but rather that the current system has become so intricate that there is no easy way to change it while knowing the ramifications imposed upon society (Wright 2010: 373).

## **6.1 Further research**

What might be an interesting continuation, one that this paper unfortunately did not fully delve into, is the question of the role of grand narratives in modern day society. Say that postmodernism is fighting on behalf of the capitalists, making the fragmented society a cacophony, that drowns out any attempt at creating sense. In this world, perhaps a return to grand narrative thinking is not inherently negative, and might function as a counterweight to postmodern thinking.

## **6.2 Concluding remarks**

On the one hand, it looks like Erik Olin Wright manages to avoid aligning himself with grand narratives, something he initially set out to do. But on the other hand, this avoidance of grand designs might be what makes his theory ultimately fall flat. As seen in the discussion of transformational theory, as long as democracy is to be at the core of any change, affecting the current system is going to be an uphill battle. The question then becomes whether it would have been better to advocate a grand narrative. As the discussion regarding utopian thinking in modern political thought showed, it might be more current than ever to find a way to work against a postmodern way of thought, seeing how it has mostly worked as a way to support capitalism. In this view, perhaps postmodern critique is more harmful than useful. It could end up serving capitalism, hindering dreaming and development of a new system.

Still, what Wright manages to achieve is showing us multiple approaches towards social change, along with their fault lines. In a volatile world, that might be enough.



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