TRANSCENDING CAPITALISM THROUGH REAL UTOPIAS

While capitalism has become more destructive both to the lives of people and the health of the environment, it seems to most people an unalterable force of nature. Social democratic hopes of taming capitalism by neutralizing its harmful effects through decisive state regulations have been undermined by the globalization and financialization of capital. Revolutionary ambitions of smashing capitalism through a ruptural seizure of state power, a coercive dissolution of capitalist institutions and their replacement by an emancipatory alternative, lack credibility. Are these the only logics of transformation? There may be a different route that points beyond capitalism: transcending capitalism by building emancipatory alternatives to capitalism in the spaces and cracks within capitalist economies and struggling to defend and expand those spaces. Real utopias in the world as it is that both prefigure a world that could be and move us in that direction.

Erik Olin Wright was born in Berkeley, California, in 1947, grew up in Kansas, and was educated at Harvard, Oxford, and the University of California-Berkeley, where he received his PhD in Sociology in 1976. He has taught sociology at the University of Wisconsin since 1976 where he is currently Vilas Distinguished Professor of Sociology. His academic work has been centrally concerned with reconstructing the Marxist tradition of social theory and research in ways that attempt to make it more relevant to contemporary concerns and more cogent as a scientific framework of analysis. His empirical research has focused especially on the changing character of class relations in developed capitalist societies. Since 1992 he has directed The Real Utopias Project which explores a wide range of proposals for new institutional designs that embody emancipatory ideals and yet are attentive to issues of pragmatic feasibility. He was president of the American Sociological Association 2011-2012. Website: www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright

The late Emeritus Professor John Western became the first professor of sociology at UQ and Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in 1970. Some 26 years later, John retired but continued to be an active researcher, writer and doctoral supervisor. He was made a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 1984, and was elected to the Swiss Academy of Development in 1989. In 2009, John’s dedication to tertiary education and more specifically the development of sociology nationally and internationally was recognised when he became a member (AM) in the General Division of the Order of Australia. John Western passed away on 6 January 2011. The John Western Memorial Lecture is a biennial public lecture jointly sponsored by the Insitute for Social Science Research and the School of Social Science at The University of Queensland to commererate John Western’s contribution to the social sciences.