

# The Alternative to Utopia Is Myopia\*

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## Abstract

This essay, written in memory of Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019), considers Wright's project of constructing and identifying real utopias. It confronts a tension in Wright's oeuvre, the question of the knowledge by means of which reformers can identify the utopias that ground the really existing real utopias.

## Keywords

utopias, Erik Olin Wright, Marx

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Ideologically speaking, the twentieth century was hostile to the idea of utopia, even though there were several bouts of utopia-oriented political practices, such as the first years of the Russian Revolution, the Cultural Revolution in China, the first years of the Cuban Revolution, and the student revolts in the late 1960s, starting with May 1968. In spite of all this, the idea of dystopia fared much better in mass culture than the idea of utopia. In the social sciences, both bourgeois and Marxist science, however, ostracized utopia, for different reasons. Marxist hostility to utopia stemmed from Marx himself and was clearly expressed in 1847 in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (written in French),<sup>1</sup> whereas the bourgeois social sciences were developed in part against the French utopian socialism of the late nineteenth century and were later much influenced by the liberal thinkers of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

In the first part of his intellectual trajectory, Erik Olin Wright was a brilliant representative of the antiutopian Marxist tradition. The hostility to utopia was most tellingly present in the work of the “non-bullshit Marxist group,” inspired by G.A. Cohen and analytical philosophy, to which Wright belonged together with Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski, and Robert Brenner.<sup>3</sup> In the second part of his intellectual trajectory, Wright became increasingly interested in the question of the political will in social transformation. He became convinced that the visions of an ideal society were the necessary guides of pragmatically possible political practices against oppression.<sup>4</sup> Long before him, Max Weber had claimed in *Politics as a Vocation* that “certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible.”<sup>5</sup> In 2010, Wright wrote the following in the overview of the Real Utopias Project:

The Real Utopia Project embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is founded on the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. . . . Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. . . . What we need, then, are “real utopias”: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change.<sup>6</sup>

This shift caused some tension in the Marxist social science Wright continued to espouse. In the afterword to Wright’s posthumous book, Michael Burawoy summarizes what he calls “the conundrum of Wright’s oeuvre”: “namely his move from class analysis without utopias to utopias without class analysis.”<sup>7</sup> Thus formulated, this conundrum raises the question, Who needs utopia? In this essay, I argue that before answering, it is necessary to confront another tension in Wright’s oeuvre, the question of the knowledge by means of which we can identify the utopias that ground the really existing real utopias. In other words, What counts as a radical understanding of society?

## Toward a New Thesis Eleven: Knowledge and Social Transformation

In 1845, shortly after publishing the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx wrote the *Theses on Feuerbach*. This was his first attempt at building a materialist philosophy centered on transformative praxis and radically different from dominant materialist philosophy, whose main exponent at the time was Ludwig Feuerbach. The famous thesis eleven, the best known of them all, reads, “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>8</sup> The word “philosophers” is used here in a broad sense, as referring to the producers of erudite knowledge, which nowadays might include the whole of scholarly and scientific knowledge deemed basic as opposed to applied. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this particular thesis raises two problems: the relationship between knowledge and social transformation, and the specific kind of knowledge best suited for the social struggles in the twenty-first century.

The first problem is that it is not true that the philosophers’ reflections on the world invariably failed to have any impact in terms of changing it. And even if that were ever the case, it ceased being so after the emergence of capitalism or, to use a broader term, after the emergence of Western modernity, especially from the sixteenth century onward. Studies in the sociology of knowledge of the last fifty years unequivocally show that the dominant interpretations of the world of a given period are the ones that legitimize, enable, or pave the way for the social changes carried out by the dominant classes or groups.

The best illustration of this point is the Cartesian conception of the nature/society or nature/humanity dichotomy (*res extensa/res cogitans*), in the terms of which humanity is totally independent of nature, just as the latter is totally independent of society. To conceive of nature and society (or humanity) as two totally separate, incommensurable entities, as is the case of the body/soul dichotomy—two substances, in Descartes’s terminology—and to build an entire philosophical system on such a foundation, is quite a revolutionary innovation. It goes against common sense, since we are incapable of imagining any human activity without the participation of nature in some form or another. This is true of the capacity of imagining to begin with, given its cerebral, neurological component. In fact, if there is nature in human beings—human nature, that is—it would be hard to conceive of it as having nothing to do with nonhuman nature. To be sure, the Cartesian conception has plenty of antecedents, from the Old Testament (the book of Genesis) to the more recent ones of Descartes’s quasi-contemporary Francis Bacon, for whom man’s mission is to master nature.<sup>9</sup> But it was Descartes who provided the dualism society/nature with the consistency of an entire philosophical system.

The nature/society dualism is deeply constitutive of the way in which we conceive of the world and of our presence and rootedness in it, even if common sense keeps reminding us that no part of what we are, think, or do can be said to be devoid of nature. Why, then, this dominance and quasi-evidence, at both the scientific and philosophical

levels, of the total separation between nature and society? It has been fully demonstrated that such separation, however absurd,<sup>10</sup> was a necessary precondition for the expansion of capitalism and colonialism. Without such a conception it would have been impossible to legitimize the unprecedented exploitation and appropriation underlying the capitalist colonialist enterprise at the dawn of the modern era. The dualism contained a principle of radical hierarchical differentiation: the qualitative superiority of humanity or society vis-à-vis nature. The differentiation was radical in that it rested on a sort of difference that was constitutive, ontological, and inscribed in the plans of divine creation.

That led, on the one hand, to nature's being transformed into a resource unconditionally available for appropriation and exploitation by human beings for their exclusive benefit. On the other hand, it allowed for everything that was viewed as nature to be appropriated in similar fashion. In other words, nature broadly considered came to encompass human beings that, by reason of their being so close to the natural world, could not be viewed as fully human. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes calls the original people of the Americas the "naturals."<sup>11</sup> Racism was thus reconfigured to signify the natural inferiority of the black race and therefore the "natural" conversion of slaves into commodities. Appropriation became the underside of the overexploitation of the workforce. The same happened in the case of women and the reconfiguration of women's "natural" inferiority, which dated from much further back. That inferiority was eventually converted into the condition for the appropriation and overexploitation of women, which in their case consisted mainly in the appropriation of unpaid work and family caregiving. In spite of being as productive as the other kind, this type of work was conventionally labeled "reproductive" so that it could be devalued, and Marxism never disowned that convention. Since that time, the idea of humanity has necessarily coexisted with the idea of subhumanity—the subhumanity of racialized, sexualized bodies. It is thus possible to conclude that the Cartesian understanding of the world has always been steeped to the marrow in the capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal transformation of the world. One of the main debates in Marxist theory today focuses on the extent to which the Cartesian understanding of the world underlies the Marxist conception of nature.

### *Knowledges Born in Struggle*

The second problem raised by the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach may be formulated as follows: In order to address the grave issues facing the world today—from the outrageous levels of social inequality to the environmental and ecological crisis, to irreversible global warming, desertification, shortage of drinking water, the disappearance of coastal regions, extreme "natural" events, recurrent pandemics, and so on—other ways of knowing must be recognized capable of capturing the commonsensical interdependence between society and nature. It has to be based on the notion that between human nature and all other natures there exist relations, not incommensurable substances; that nature is inherent in humanity and that the reverse is equally true; that we belong to nature rather than that nature belongs to us. In order to account for this,

Marxist social theory must undergo a profound revision. Wright was engaged in such a revision. But his premature death prevented him from accomplishing it. Herein lies the fundamental limitation of the Real Utopias Project. In the spirit of continuing on Wright's path, I propose, as a revisionist task, the epistemologies of the South, a cluster of epistemologies having in common their being centered on the knowledges (in the plural) born in struggle.<sup>12</sup>

A close reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* shows that Marx had in mind two paradigms of knowledge. The first was the paradigm of knowledge produced after the struggle. This was the paradigm he was criticizing and that derived from Hegel's philosophy of knowledge. According to Hegel, the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk, that is, knowledge emerges in the quiet period of peace once struggles are settled. The problem is that, after the struggles, the only knowledge that survives is the knowledge of the winners. Bourgeois social theory is the knowledge of the winners, and such is the knowledge produced and taught in general at the Western-centric universities. The philosophers' knowledge that Marx criticized was not an unconditional understanding; it was an understanding geared to prevent meaningful social transformation. In his critique, Marx anticipates a different paradigm of knowledge: knowledge before the struggle. Indeed, Marxist theory was conceived as a theory with the historical task of preparing the working class to move from a class *in sich* to a class *für sich*, a class with the revolutionary class consciousness. The immense diversity of social struggles throughout the twentieth century, as well as the plurality of collectives in struggle that did not fit Marx's historical subject, suggests that we need a third paradigm of knowledge: knowledges born in struggle.<sup>13</sup> They are a cluster of knowledges, as diverse as the struggles that marked the twentieth century, from national liberation and working-class struggles to indigenous, afro-descendent, feminist, peasant, urban, ecological, dalits-based, human rights struggles: an immense diversity of struggles, of oppositional narratives and organizational styles, whose gathering in the World Social Forum meetings starting in 2001 captured global attention.<sup>14</sup> Such struggles are the source of a wealth of knowledges, knowledges produced by those social classes and social groups as they have been resisting the structural injustices caused by modern domination. Such struggles and knowledges confirm that the three main modes of modern domination are capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. To the extent that it either informed many of such struggles or was reinvented by them, Marxism became part of the third paradigm of knowledge, a kind of knowledge born in struggle. I call this paradigm of knowledge the epistemologies of the South.<sup>15</sup> The South is here conceived of as an epistemic concept rather than a geographic one, a metaphor of the knowledges born in struggle.

The epistemologies of the South are characterized by a double cognitive inquiry founded on the idea that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. On the one hand, they aim at retrieving popular and vernacular knowledges mobilized in the struggles that have never been recognized as relevant contributions toward a better understanding of the world by the holders of scholarly or scientific knowledge, be it philosophy or the social and human sciences. Such cognitive exclusion lies at the core of social exclusion. To give one example, the elimination of indigenous peoples

and their ways of living (genocide) was always the other side of the destruction (the demonization, erasure) of their ways of knowing (epistemicide).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the epistemologies of the South claim that concrete social struggles usually resort to and combine with different kinds of knowledge, popular or vernacular with scholarly, scientific (including Marxist) knowledge. The struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology by the Via Campesina,<sup>17</sup> for example, combine peasant knowledge with agronomic and biochemical knowledge and, in many cases, a Marxist analysis of the land question (particularly, the land rent). Such articulations and combinations I call ecologies of knowledges, mutual transformation of different ways of knowing as they engage in dialogues geared to strengthen social struggles against domination.

### *Abyssal Line, Radical and Nonradical Exclusions*

The abyssal line is the core idea underlying the epistemologies of the South. It marks the radical division between forms of metropolitan sociability and forms of colonial sociability, a division that has characterized the Western modern world since the fifteenth century. The abyssal line is the line that separates the world of the humans, the world of “us,” from the world of the subhumans, the world of “them.” This latter world is the world of racialized and sexualized bodies and social groups. As I mentioned above, Western modernity comprises three main modes of domination: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.<sup>18</sup> Both colonialism and patriarchy existed before capitalism but were reconfigured as they became an integral part of modern domination. Since then, the three main modes of domination have operated in close articulation on a global scale. Such an articulation varies according to region and time period. The reason for such a structural articulation lies in the fact that free social labor underlying capitalist domination, and premised on the principle of formal equality of human beings, does not sustain itself as a pillar of the modern social formations without the copresence of highly devalued and nonpaid social labor. These two last forms of social labor are provided by ontologically degraded human beings, be they racialized or sexualized bodies. Such bodies are the domain of colonialism and patriarchy. They are the realms of subhumanity, the zone of nonbeing, as Franz Fanon designated them. Accordingly, there is no capitalism without colonialism and patriarchy. The end of historical colonialism (territorial occupation by a foreign country) did not involve the historical end of colonialism. It continues today under new forms—racism, xenophobia, slave labor, internment and deportation of immigrants and refugees, land grabbing, and the massive expulsion of peasant, indigenous, and African communities in the name of development and megaprojects. From a Marxist perspective stretching from Rosa Luxemburg to David Harvey, the continuing articulation of capitalism with colonialism and patriarchy is the manifestation of primitive accumulation as a permanent condition of capitalist accumulation.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of social struggles against domination, the drama of our time can be summarized thus: whereas capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal modes of domination operate in close articulation, the resistance against them has historically been highly fragmented. Many anticapitalist struggles have been racist and sexist, while many

feminist struggles have been racist and capitalist, and, finally, many anticolonial or antiracism struggles have been sexist and capitalist.<sup>20</sup> As long as this fragmentation is not superseded, modern domination will continue, and victories in one domain of struggle will tend to coexist with defeats in another domain of struggle.<sup>21</sup>

The abyssal line is the line that separates the sociability of the formally equal human beings (the metropolitan zone) from the sociability of ontological inferior and thus subhuman beings (the colonial zone). This abyssal line actively engenders the invisibility or the utter irrelevance of the ways of being, living, knowing, and feeling of the populations on “the other side of the line” and, as a result, the invisibility or banalization of the struggles they engage in. Because of the abyssal line, there is no humanity without subhumanity in contemporary capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal societies. Humanity is at best a project that can be fulfilled only when the abyssal line is eliminated, that is, when capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal domination comes to an end. The abyssal line is as radical as it is invisible, hiding behind the mask of liberal ideology and its abstract political ethics of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

There are social exclusions on both sides of the line, but they are structurally different. The exclusions in the metropolitan zone are regulated by legal, social, and political norms that apply to formally equal human beings; in this sense they are, no matter how serious, nonradical exclusions. On the contrary, the exclusions in the colonial zone are regulated by legal, social, and political norms that apply to less-than-human human beings. Irrespective of the legal or political mask or façade, such norms are geared to either appropriation or violent extermination. In this sense, they are radical exclusions. Examples of appropriation and violence abound: forced and slave labor; forced sterilization of women; extrajudicial elimination of grassroots movement leaders; women’s bodies as objects or spoils in civil wars or in rivalries among criminal gangs; horrific and banalized drowning of thousands of immigrants in the Mediterranean Sea; internment camps for refugees, immigrants, and their children; sexual assault of young girls as “part of the culture”; apartheid and neocolonial state regimes; electrified walls against undesired populations; continuing plunder of natural resources and the consequent expulsion of peasants and indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories; ethnic profiling; genocide of black youth in the peripheries of large cities in Latin America; domestic violence and femicide; and so on.

The abyssal line is both a structural line and an existential one, as it is inscribed in the lived experience of racialized and sexualized bodies. As an illustration, I describe two “hypothetical” examples that are too real to be considered a mere figment of the sociological imagination. First: In a racist white society, a young black student going to secondary school is living in a world of metropolitan sociability. He may consider himself excluded, whether because he is often avoided by his schoolmates or because the syllabus deals with materials that are insulting to the culture and history of peoples of African descent. Nonetheless, such exclusions are not abyssal; he is part of the same student community and, at least in theory, has access to legal and administrative mechanisms that will enable him to argue against discrimination. However, when the same young man, on his way back home, is stopped and searched by the police because of ethnic profiling, and may be violently beaten if not assassinated, at such a moment the



young man is crossing the abyssal line and thus moving from the world of metropolitan sociability to the world of colonial sociability. From an ontological perspective, he is descending from the realm of full humanity to the level of subhumanity. His exclusion becomes abyssal, and any appeal to rights is no more than a cruel façade.

The second example: In a sexist society, a woman with a job in the formal economy inhabits the world of metropolitan sociability. She may be victim of a nonabyssal exclusion to the extent that, in violation of employment and labor laws, her male coworkers receive a higher salary to perform the same tasks. But she may appeal to the courts and to administrative or regulatory agencies. However, when she is returning home she may be a victim of gang rape on public transportation, or she may be assassinated as a war target or spoil in gang rivalries (femicide), or she may still be a victim of domestic violence when at home. At that particular moment, she is crossing the abyssal line and moving from the world of metropolitan sociability to the world of colonial sociability, the realm of subhumanity.

Modern critical theories influenced by the Kantian conception of humanity have by and large been unaware of the abyssal line. They have acknowledged different degrees of exclusion but have refused to recognize the existence of qualitative differences between abyssal and nonabyssal social exclusions. And indeed, there are two qualitative differences between abyssal and nonabyssal exclusion. The first concerns ontological status. Only abyssal exclusions are premised on the idea that the victim or target is not fully human but is rather a “naturally” degraded sort of human being. From the perspective of modern abyssal thinking, it is only logical that said victim or target should not be treated as a fully human being, like “us.” As long as the three main modes of modern domination (capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy) are in force and act in tandem, large social groups will experience in their lives and in a systematic way this fatal crossing of the abyssal line. The other side of the abyssal line, the colonial zone, is far from being a residual category. The whole of racialized and sexualized populations in contemporary societies are the majority of the world population. Most of them are workers who besides class exploitation endure racial and sexual discrimination. Most of them live in cosmopolitan urban spaces but are the underside of such spaces.

The second difference concerns cultural recognition. Metropolitan sociability is the zone of the “us” culture, a cluster of cultural values, ideas, signs and symbols, perceptions of social behavior, and customs and conventions that, however internally immensely diversified, are generally known as Western values. The idea of universal abstract equality of human beings and the legal and political instruments derived therefrom regulate nonabyssal exclusions. On the contrary, colonial sociability is the domain of the “them” culture. Being a historical product of colonialism and of cultural contacts for five centuries, colonial sociability is today an assemblage of Western and non-Western (African, Indigenous, Asian, peasant) values and worldviews. The otherness of culture is often mobilized to legitimate abyssal exclusion. Subhumanity is both ontological and cultural inferiority.

Modern domination is a global, uneven, and combined mode of articulation between abyssal and nonabyssal exclusions. The elusiveness of the abyssal line and the



consequent difficulty in recognizing these two types of exclusion is due to the fact that the ideology of universal metropolitan sociability, as well as all the juridical and political apparatuses that go with it, hovers above the world of colonial sociability as an ever renewed and always betrayed promise. The illusion created by this powerful ideology has led both theorists and activists to consider as legitimate only the struggles designed to resist against nonabyssal exclusions. The resulting difficulty in disentangling abyssal from nonabyssal exclusions has often contributed to make invisible and worsen the abyssal exclusions affecting racialized and sexualized social groups.<sup>22</sup>

### *What Kinds of Struggles for What Kind of Real Utopias?*

A close look at the social struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy in the postwar period shows that they have suffered from three fatal limitations: the illusion of full humanity, fragmentation, and monoculturalism. The illusion of full humanity consists in conceiving contemporary societies as having overcome the abyssal line after the end of historical capitalism and the historical victories of women's movements. The nonrecognition of the abyssal line has led many to ignore the fundamental difference between abyssal and nonabyssal exclusions and to conceive and organize social struggles as if they were all resisting against nonabyssal exclusions. Since the nonabyssal exclusions occur in the domain of metropolitan sociability, they resort to the institutional resources that are available and more or less efficient in this domain, such as the legal system and the political system. In retrospect, the persistence of the abyssal exclusions to which racialized and sexualized bodies and populations are subjected in our societies reveals how ineffective such struggles have been in undoing abyssal exclusion. The zone of nonbeing seems today as violent as before, as denounced by such movements as Black Lives Matter or Ni Una Más (the slogan of the Latin American women's movements against femicide). The need to proclaim the right to life as the objective of struggle illustrates the extent to which the ideology of full humanity is illusory.

The second limitation of the predominant framing of social struggles in contemporary societies is fragmentation. As I mentioned before, because the three main modes of domination operate in tandem and because social struggles tend to focus on one of them, as illustrated by the "single issue" social movements, the resistance often leads to much frustration and may even be counterproductive. Gains in one given domain of domination and oppression often coexist with defeats in another domain. To give an example, the tragic assassination of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez from the early 1990s until today coexists with the important victories of the feminist movements in Latin America and elsewhere. In part, this is because, in general, feminist movements have not directly confronted the specific mode of savage capitalism pervading in the region. Two outstanding exceptions are Rita Segato and Sayak Valencia, the latter having coined the suggestive concept of gore capitalism to characterize such savage capitalism.<sup>23</sup> The most recent and eloquent voice in the same direction is that of Comandanta Amanda of the Zapatista movement (EZLN) in the inauguration of the Second International Meeting of Women in the Struggle (December 27, 2019):

All of a sudden, perhaps your struggle may find help in listening to other fights we fight as women. Whether we agree or not with other struggles and their ways and geographies, it is important that we all listen and learn. The point is not to compete about which is the best struggle, but to share.<sup>24</sup>

The third limitation of social struggles since World War II is monoculturalism. It is true that this period witnessed the emergence of social struggles against cultural suppression that led to the recognition of cultural diversity and cultural difference, particularly in the field of education (ethnic, postcolonial, and women's studies and departments). However, as cultural suppression was framed as a nonabyssal exclusion, the struggles were fought by resorting to Western cultural values and institutions. As a result, cultural empowerment was conceived of as a "cultural struggle," that is, as a struggle separated from the political economy. Capitalist domination was thereby allowed to surf the wave of cultural recognition, reducing interculturality to multiculturalism and transforming it into a source of profit in the entertainment industry. The underlying colonialist and patriarchal domination was left untouched.

By and large, the real utopias proposed by Wright seem to correspond to the pragmatically progressive political and social innovations that confront nonabyssal exclusions. In other words, they occur in the metropolitan domain of sociability. It is an open question whether they can address abyssal exclusions prevailing in the colonial zone, the zone of nonbeing. Moreover, given their pragmatic outlook, one may question whether they are geared to combine and mobilize resistance against the three modes of domination. Last, one may reasonably suspect that the cultural character of the utopian vision underlying the real utopias remains within the Western confines. This point will be detailed in the following section.

### *Who Needs What Kind of Utopia*

Utopia is needed by the classes and ethno-racialized and gendered social groups that are excluded by modern domination, and it is needed most by those that are victims of abyssal exclusion. The latter are those whose lives and livelihoods are fatally affected by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. They are the most deprived of conceiving of the world as their own and consequently prevented from transforming it according to their own aspirations. Their utopia is the ideal of a society in which they will be treated as fully human, a society as free of capitalist domination as of colonialist and patriarchal domination. In sum, full humanity. But their conception of humanity does not necessarily coincide with the one that prevails in the metropolitan sociability, humanity as the universe of formally equal and free individual human beings. They have their own conception of humanity that very often is either anchored in non-Western values or combines Western and non-Western worldviews. The claims of such populations to full humanity entail the recognition of their own conceptions of humanity, their own ways of knowing and evaluating what counts as a full humanity. Otherwise, such inclusion will be another form of exclusion. The visions of an ideal society are therefore bound to be imagined in intercultural plural terms if they are to

ground social struggles that confront not only capitalism but also colonialism and patriarchy. In the absence of such intercultural understanding, the visions of an ideal society guiding social struggles in the metropolitan zone may be quite inadequate to guide struggles of the classes and social groups on the other side of the abyssal line, in the colonial zone. In sum, an intercultural and pluralistic conception of full humanity is needed. There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice (justice among different ways of knowing and of good living).

The intercultural and pluralistic framing and understanding of utopia equally applies in framing and understanding real utopias. Moreover, it must be born in mind that the radical needs of classes and groups undergoing nonabyssal exclusions are bound to be different from those of classes and groups undergoing abyssal exclusions. After five centuries of modern domination and of resistance against it, the bottom line is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there are social classes and groups whose single (and most radical) need is the guarantee of the right to life, to fully human life.

Understanding the visions of an ideal society imagined by bodies of populations subjected to abyssal exclusions requires an epistemological break with Western-centric modes of thinking. After all, such modes of thinking have been responsible for their invisibility as political subjects. Only knowledges born in struggle will be able to retrieve such visions and the ways they guide social struggles. They are knowledges embodied and embedded in the social struggles as they unfold. They are complex assemblages of knowledges that often combine Western and non-Western cultural premises, scientific and vernacular or popular knowledge, reason and emotion, experience from past struggles (and even ancestral ways of knowing, particularly in the case of indigenous peoples' struggles), and reflexive creativity in the face of new challenges. Anchored in knowledges born in struggle, new alternatives emerge, new ways of being in society ruled by principles of reciprocity, mutuality, and relationality. They often lead to real utopias, in Wright's sense. In the following, I provide a recent illustration.

Particularly after the 1990s, the indigenous movements and struggles have gained a new strength and visibility in different continents, from the Americas to Asia and Oceania. Their struggles combined extrainstitutional mobilizations (public protests, blocking roads to defend their territories, boycotting the operations of mining companies, etc.) and institutional ones (constitutional and legal reforms). Two of the most prominent radical institutional changes achieved by them are, on the one hand, the new constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) and, on the other hand, the declaration of a sacred river for the indigenous peoples in New Zealand as a subject of human rights.

In many ways, the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia amount to a profound refoundation of the modern state. For the first time in modern constitutions, the guiding principles of state and social organization are formulated in a noncolonial language, in quechua and ayamara.<sup>25</sup> I am referring to *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña*, principles of good living and of harmony with nature.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the Constitution of Ecuador grants rights to nature, nature understood according to the Andean worldview as Pachamama (Mother Earth). Nature thus ceases to be capitalist nature (natural

capital) to become the source of life and natural heritage. Article 71 states, "Nature, or Pachamama, where life exists and reproduces itself, has the right to have its existence respected in its entirety, including the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes." As a result, a solidary and sovereign economic-social model is privileged, a model based on a harmonious relationship with nature. This does not preclude capitalist economy from being protected by the constitution, but it does prevent capitalist relations from determining the logic, direction, and rhythm of national development.

On the other hand, after decades of social struggles by the Maoris, the main indigenous people in New Zealand, the New Zealand parliament approved, in 2107, a law that grants human rights to the Whanganui River, a sacred river for the Maoris. It is a very robust declaration. It establishes the river as a juridical person in line with the ancestral law of the indigenous peoples, and, in doing this, it recognizes the indigenous law as a source of national jurisprudence. Moreover, millions of New Zealand dollars are granted to repair the damage caused to the river by polluting industries and to defend (as a kind of legal fund) the "health and well-being" of the river in the future.<sup>27</sup>

As illustrated by these two examples, the visions of an ideal society and the real utopias emerging from them presuppose an intercultural understanding in which non-Western cultures, ways of knowing, and values are decisively present. From the perspective of a monocultural Western-centric conception of law and nature, to grant human rights to nature or to a river is a contradiction in terms, an utter nonsense. On the contrary, from an intercultural perspective, such constitutional and legal innovations amount to the recognition of a non-Western, anti-Cartesian conception of nature, a conception that refuses both the dichotomy humanity/nature and the subhuman character of whatever is closer to nature, such as racialized and sexualized bodies. Such innovations are complex because they combine Western and non-Western conceptions. From an intercultural point of view, the concept of the rights of nature or of granting human rights to a river is a legal hybrid. It combines the Western-centric concept of right and legal personality with an indigenous-centric concept of nature and river, as sources of life, and even sacred entities. As a real utopia they point to the need for a new universal declaration of human rights in which the rights of nature are recognized.<sup>28</sup>

Both examples aspire at overcoming the abyssal line whereby they combine anticapitalist objectives with anticolonialist and antipatriarchal ones. They preclude the continuation of extractivist, pollutant industries, and fully recognize the full human dignity of the indigenous peoples and the maternal, caregiving concept of the "mother earth." Above all, they show that, contrary to conventional neoliberal wisdom, there is no lack of alternatives. They are there but have been made invisible or blocked by dominant ways of understanding reality and organizing political action. In sum, they show that we do not need alternatives; we rather need an alternative thinking of alternatives.

### *Alliances among Social Struggles*

The difficulties in forging alliances among social struggles is one of the most intractable questions haunting progressive politics. Such difficulties stem from a plurality of factors whose weight varies according to the time and the political context.

Such factors may be as diverse as the historical trajectory of the different political movements, the styles of organization, and the inertias or *habitus* of resistance they generate; the divergent visions of emancipation or liberation; the specific narratives of domination and of what counts as successful resistance; the differences in reading the political context and the concrete correlation of forces. As mentioned above, the persistence of modern domination is in part due to the fragmentation of struggles resisting against it. Victories in some sectoral struggles often coexist with defeats in other sectoral struggles. For instance, a victory in an anticapitalist, trade-union-based struggle may result in aggravating racial or sexual discrimination. There is abundant evidence of the frustration deriving from such fragmentation.

From the perspective of knowledges born in struggle put forward here, two basic types of articulation among struggles are required to strengthen anticapitalist, anticolonialist, and antipatriarchal resistance: the articulation between struggles against abyssal exclusions and struggles against nonabyssal exclusions; and the articulation among struggles resisting the different modes or vectors of domination.

Articulation does not mean that the different struggles lose their identity or specificity and much less that all the struggles must resist all dimensions of domination. Moreover, alliances will always be limited in scope and pragmatic in purpose. Articulation means only that a broad and comprehensive conception of domination is generally shared and that anticapitalist, antiracist, and antisexist struggles are all equally important even if some may be more urgent than others in a specific political context.

The articulation between struggles confronting nonabyssal exclusions and abyssal exclusions is complex particularly because, as I mentioned above, in the last seventy years, social struggles have been dominated by the idea that all forms of social exclusion are nonabyssal (among formally equals, the metropolitan zone) and that, therefore, they should rely on the institutional tools of the modern state, that is, the legal and political system, both based on the idea of the formal equality among human beings. But as I argued before, the efficacy of such tools is severely impaired when dealing with modes of domination grounded on the natural inferiority of some social groups, that is, colonialism and patriarchy, the zone of nonbeing. As a result, the resilience of racism (and all the other manifestations of contemporary colonialism) and of patriarchy and, most strikingly, its intensification in the most recent period with the rise of extreme right forces has been minimized and relatively trivialized, thereby adding to the deep frustration of racialized and sexualized populations. In this light, the struggles against abyssal exclusions should be able to combine institutional and extrainstitutional tools and strategies. Moreover, concerning institutional strategies, the modern state form must be confronted at its core, that is, at the level of the constitution.

Articulation among struggles that confront different dimensions of domination is equally complex. In critical progressive politics, the idea that anticapitalist struggles are more important than anticolonialist or antipatriarchal struggles has prevailed for a long time. The abstract priority granted to anticapitalist struggles has meant, among other things, that organizational resources, programmatic focus, and media visibility should be concentrated on such struggles. The tacit assumption is that a society free of

capitalism would also be a society free of colonialism (more often than not narrowly conceived as racism) and patriarchy. This idea has led to deep divisions in the progressive camp. Just to give an example, for a long time, indigenous peoples were not even recognized as political subjects; the historical and cultural identity of their struggles was denied and diluted in the broad category of peasant struggles; their claim that colonialism, rather than being eliminated with the political independence of European colonies, had only changed form (internal colonialism, neocolonialism, land grabbing, etc.) was accordingly suppressed or ridiculed by progressive forces (trade unions and left parties).<sup>29</sup>

In more recent times, particularly after the Zapatist uprising (1994) and the World Social Forum (2001) and as feminist, indigenous, antiracist, ecological, peasant, or human rights struggles became more visible, the idea of abstract hierarchy among social struggles has undergone significant changes. A more complex notion of modern domination has emerged. Accordingly, the idea of abstract hierarchy among struggles is being replaced by the idea of situated and contextualized hierarchies and time frames.

A paradigmatic example may be retrieved from the feminist struggles in Chile throughout 2019. Massive and resilient mobilizations managed to amplify the struggles by building alliances among different grassroots movements involving large strata of the middle classes (metropolitan zone) and the indigenous Mapuche movement (colonial zone) with a comprehensive political agenda that included anticapitalist, anticolonialist, and antipatriarchal demands. It combined extrainstitutional strategies and institutional ones. Concerning the latter, it refused the confines of liberal democratic politics and demanded an authentic refoundation of the modern Chilean state to be designed in a popular, feminist, and plurinational constitutional assembly.<sup>30</sup> This process has been interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic but will likely continue once the pandemic is over.

The real utopias, both the really existing and the future ones, should address the question of articulations among struggles in the design of the radical institutional innovations that characterize them. Their sustainability and expansion might depend on this.

## Conclusion

This essay was written in the spirit of continuing Wright's indefatigable effort in searching for real utopias. The conception of social reality underlying real utopias by far exceeds whatever is out there conventionally viewed as "real." It includes also the possible, the "not yet" of reality, to use Ernst Bloch's concept.<sup>31</sup> The possible demands a vision of the impossible, and the utopia is the impossible guiding the possible. The impossible is different from the unthinkable. In each epochal time we can only imagine as impossible what is somehow already out there as an aspiration, an idea that grounds true hope.

The specificity of our epochal time has been the ideology of reducing the possible to whatever already exists, the ideology of "there is no alternative" or "the end of history." Deprived of utopia, politics plunged into myopia and has indeed been dominated by myopic political leaders. Fernando Coronil formulated this quagmire: "Thus we have capitalism for a present without a future, and socialism for a future without a



present.”<sup>32</sup> Wright fought with brilliance against this stagnation, providing us with a brighter future based on a promising present. His mission was prematurely interrupted. It is up to us to continue it.

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### Notes

1. See Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995). See also Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); and Frederick Engels, “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (1880; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974). A critical analysis of Marxism as utopia is in Richard Kilminster, “The Debate about Utopias from a Sociological Perspective,” *Human Figurations* 3, no. 2 (2014), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.203?view=text;rgn=main>.
2. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
3. The theoretical affiliation of this group was analytical Marxism. A good overview of the group is in John Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
4. As I spent four to five months a year in Madison in the past thirty-five years, I was a close witness to this intellectual shift. By the early 1990s Erik became very much interested in my research on participatory budgeting in the municipality of Porto Alegre, Brazil, which he saw as a pragmatically possible initiative guided by a vision of radical democracy much beyond the confines of liberal democracy. His interest in this topic led to my publishing an overview of my research in *Politics & Society*. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a Redistributive Democracy,” *Politics & Society* 26, no. 4 (1998): 461–510.
5. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, eds., *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 128.



6. Available at <https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/OVERVIEW.html>. In 1969, André Gorz had advanced a convergent idea with the concept of revolutionary reforms.
7. Michael Burawoy, "Afterword," in Erik Olin Wright, *How to Be an Anti-capitalist in the 21st Century* (London: Verso, 2019), 156.
8. The *Theses* are in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974).
9. See, e.g., Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620; London: Macmillan, 1878).
10. The first one to show that was Benedict Spinoza in *Ethics*, written between 1661 and 1675. A modern edition is Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics, and Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993).
11. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, C.B. Macpherson, ed. (1651; Middlesex: Pelican Classics, 1976), 186–87. According to Aristotle, the grand chain of being, the scale of nature (*scala naturae*), was man, woman, child, slave, barbarian, animal. This conception influenced Western thought for many centuries.
12. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
13. Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*.
14. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006).
15. Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*; Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*.
16. On the concept of epistemicide, see Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, 8.
17. An international social movement made up of peasant organizations from all continents.
18. There are other modes of domination, such as politics, religion, caste systems, and ableism, but these other modes work in tandem with the main ones, and for that reason I call them satellite dominations. See Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*, 259.
19. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913; New York: Routledge, 2003); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87. More recently, Gonçalves and Costa have proposed the concept of entangled accumulation, inspired by Therborn's concept of entangled modernities, to capture what in my conception is the permanent articulation among capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. See Guilherme Leite Gonçalves and Sérgio Costa, "From Primitive Accumulation to Entangled Accumulation: Decentering Marxist Theory of Capitalist Expansion," *European Journal of Social Theory* 23 no. 2 (2020): 146–64; G. Therborn, "Entangled Modernities," *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 3 (2003): 293–305.
20. I am speaking about general trends. Particularly in more recent times some grassroots movements against racism and sexism have become more radical, conceiving of their struggles as explicitly against capitalism. Concerning grassroots feminist movements, Silvia Federici offers an eloquent overview and analysis of this radical move. See Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).
21. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 30, no. 1 (2007): 45–89; Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*; Santos, *End of the Cognitive Empire*.

22. A topic to be pursued with further research is the impact of the convergent rise of neoliberalism and extreme right ideology on the “position” of the abyssal line. It may be argued that the abyssal line has been moving in recent decades in such a way that the colonial zone, the realm of abyssal exclusions, has been expanding by encompassing ever larger bodies of populations, while the metropolitan zone has been shrinking. The rise of cultural racism (including islamophobia and, more recently, sinophobia) and of other beliefs in intrinsic and insurmountable cultural differences may be leading to the ontological inferiorization of more and more people. In an authoritarian dystopia, even more extreme left dissident political activists or uberized “self-enslaved” workers could be looked on as subhumans.
23. Rita Segato, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado* (México DF: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 2006); Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Cidade do Mexico: Paidós, 2016).
24. “Words from the Zapatista Women at the Opening of the Second International Gathering of Women Who Struggle,” Enlace Zapatista communiqué, December 30, 2019, <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/12/30/words-from-the-zapatista-women-at-the-opening-of-the-second-international-gathering-of-women-who-struggle/>.
25. Highlighting the innovative contributions of indigenous worldviews in this regard by no means implies bypassing the patriarchal thinking that underpins much indigenous thought rightly criticized by feminists. From the perspective of the epistemologies of the South, the recognition of the indigenous ways of thinking always involves a critical evaluation in the light of their concrete contribution to strengthen anticapitalist, anticolonialist, and antipatriarchal struggles.
26. Irene León, ed., *Sumak Kawsay: Buen vivir y cambios civilizatorios* (Quito: FEDAEPS, 2009), 65; Alberto Acosta, “Siempre más democracia, nunca menos,” in Alberto Acosta, Esperanza Martínez, and Martínez Yáñez, eds., *El buen vivir: Una vía para el desarrollo* (Quito: Abya-Yala, 2009), 20.
27. L. Charpleix, “The Whanganui River as Te Awa Tupua: Place-Based Law in a Legally Pluralistic Society,” *Geographical Journal* 184 (2018): 19–30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12238>. The law, Te Awa Tupua [Whanganui River claims settlement] Act 2017, may be consulted at <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2017/0007/latest/whole.html>. On the Whanganui tribes, see D. Young, “Whanganui Tribes: The 20th and 21st Centuries,” *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2005), <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whanganui-tribes/page-3>.
28. In the last fifty years indigenous people have resorted to conventional human rights to struggle for the recognition of their territories and self-determination, and to this extent they have used legal instruments premised on the idea of nonabyssal exclusions to fight against abyssal ones. I have analyzed in detail this strategy in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 313–27, and in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Más allá del pensamiento abisal: Descolonización de la justicia, derecho propio e interlegalidad para una paz democrática* (Bogotá: Instituto CAPAZ, 2020). Their success is premised on the possibility of resorting to hegemonic legal instruments by means of counterhegemonic appropriations. Such possibility has varied across time and political contexts. When, however, they claim the rights of nature, they are pointing to conceptions of life and dignity that are at odds with the Western-centric conception of human dignity underlying human rights. In this case, the strong recognition of philosophical and political diversity of the world

- presupposed by such a claim aims at crossing or superseding the abyssal line. Santos, *Más allá del pensamiento abisal*.
29. There were prominent exceptions. This is the case of the great Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, who claimed that the original sin of the Americas was “to have been built without the indian and against the indian.” He was severely criticized by the Kommintern and communist intellectuals for this “nationalistic romantic” deviation from the orthodox conception of the only revolutionary political subject, the working class. See José Carlos Mariátegui, “El hecho economico en la historia Peruana,” *Mundial* (Lima, August 14, 1925).
  30. See *Declaración de la Asamblea Feminista Plurinacional ante el “Acuerdo nacional por la paz y por una nueva constitución” en Chile*, <https://www.mujeresdelsur-afm.org/declaracion-asamblea-feminista-plurinacional-acuerdo-nacional-paz-nueva-constitucion-chile/>.
  31. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 286–315.
  32. Fernando Coronil, “The Future in Question: History and Utopia in Latin America (1989–2010),” in Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derluguian Martínez, eds., *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 250; Fernando Coronil, “El futuro en el ruedo: Historia y utopía en la América Latina (1989–2010),” *Revista Casa de las Américas* 276 (July–September 2014): 19.

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