

Editors' introduction: Irish challenges of transformation

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In early March 2013, the National University of Ireland Maynooth, University College Cork and the University of Limerick hosted a visit from the outgoing president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), the American academic Erik Olin Wright. His visit to UL focused on examining transformation from the perspective of *method*, in Cork his visit was an opportunity to explore the *concept* of transformation while his Maynooth visit focused on *alternatives* for transformation when over 150 academics and civil society activists discussed Irish possibilities for real utopias in ten workshops that examined practical ideas for transformation in areas as diverse as gender equality, commons, knowledge, basic income, banking, co-operatives, degrowth and democracy. He also participated in a number of symposia, seminars, site visits, political meetings and conferences, and visited various civil society initiatives including the Fatima Regeneration Project, Cloughjordan ecovillage, the Basic Income Ireland network and *Look Left* magazine. This special edition of the *IJS* commemorates this series of events and is presented as a contribution to Irish public sociology. It aims to further public discourse about alternatives and explicitly seeks to be relevant to wider civil society and the possibilities for social transformation.

Based on the work of Wright, transformation is here understood as the ways in which *strategies* of transformation have some prospect over the long term to erode capitalist power relations and build socialist alternatives. Wright identifies three strategic logics of transformation that have characterised the history of anti-capitalist struggle. *Ruptural* transformations envision creating new emancipatory institutions through a sharp break with existing institutions and social structures. *Interstitial* transformations seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches, spaces and margins of capitalist society. These potentially erode the constraints on the spaces themselves but also serve

a critical ideological function of showcasing alternatives. *Symbiotic* transformations deepen the institutional forms of popular social empowerment while simultaneously helping solve certain practical problems; they can be called 'nonreformist reforms' which make life better within the existing economic system but expand the potential for future advances of democratic power.

The articles in this special issue contribute towards building a set of ideas that challenge the very basis of neoliberal ideology. Some of these ideas are within the framework of capitalism and the movement from neoliberal capitalism to a more socially, politically and environmentally sustainable capitalism, while others are developed as incompatible with capitalism and focus on providing the seedbed for an alternative mode of production, an alternative society. Wright focuses on the global challenge of transforming capitalism while we focus on the Irish case. Obviously, the central focus on the need to curb the market mechanism and overcome the fictitious commodities of land, labour and money apply as strongly to Ireland as to any other country. Ireland remains an extremely market-friendly state with its low-tax model of development, which has weak capacity to ensure market activities serve the needs of citizens or to make major transformative changes to core greenhouse gas-emitting industries including agriculture, construction and agri-food. The centrality of democratic deliberation as a way of redesigning a new economy for the common good is an essential starting point. But this has to go hand in hand with the strengthening of state power to curb the colonising reach of the market. The role of the state is thus still highly relevant. What sort of state will be needed to plan the scale of changes that are necessary, to ensure that the private market becomes an active collaborator instead of a determined obstacle, and to change the behaviour of citizens and consumers? What sort of civil society actions and activism will be needed and how will these be developed and supported? And how can the *laissez-faire* economy be restructured to change radically its forms of production and distribution so as to enable the move to a low-carbon economy? The answers to these questions, and the actions to implement them, will shape the contours of a new Irish model of development.

The Maynooth seminar in March 2013 examined a range of transformative strategies for today's Ireland, including a state investment bank, participative and deliberative democratic reforms, different approaches to knowledge production and dissemination, transformative approaches to education, and gender- and equality-proofing measures to enhance public policy making. Not all of these could be included in this special issue but those articles included show the range and potential of the ideas discussed at that seminar.

This special issue begins by republishing Erik Olin Wright's presidential address to the 2012 ASA conference entitled 'Transforming capitalism through real utopias'. It is followed by two critical responses, the first from Ruth Levitas which focuses on commonalities and differences between her work on utopia and Wright's work while the second by Conor McCabe takes issue with

Wright's failure to adequately address class power, in particular the power of finance capital.

The second section of the special issue opens with articles by the editors. The first, by Peadar Kirby, examines the triple crisis of capitalism with special attention to moving urgently to a low-carbon society and offers degrowth and eco-socialism as transformational strategies to redistribute power from the market to the state and society. Mary P. Murphy examines the first steps towards eco-socialism and degrowth and identifies challenges that a steady state economy raises for employment and revenue generation while also pointing out how degrowth offers an exciting opportunity to redistribute time for care and democratic participation as well as the possibility of new political alliances.

The issue then turns to examine specific strategies for transformational change. Anne B. Ryan's article highlights the importance of the concept of the commons and how it can be used to advance transformational strategies across a number of policy areas, including environmental policy. Stephen Nolan, Eleonore Perrin Massebiaux and Tomas Gorman examine the transformative potential of developing a flourishing co-operative sector in the economy, both in production and distribution, and how this is an essential requirement of the need to decommodify labour and lay the foundations for a more sustainable economy. Seán Healy, Michelle Murphy and Brigid Reynolds examine Basic Income and argue that it offers a practical set of proposals to decommodify labour through providing income as an entitlement of citizenship and not just of participation in the labour market. In practical terms, reducing inequality requires that it be supplemented by a strict limit on higher incomes and equality of access to employment. Finally Rory Hearne's article on housing and regeneration illustrates the rights-based standards possible in a society that serves people rather than capital, and the importance of deliberative and participatory democratic practices at the heart of eco-socialism. Collectively these articles serve to illustrate the practical capacity of truly transformative ideas; however, the challenge is to influence contemporary political debate towards the more ambitious goal of the transformation of capitalism and to encourage people to think positively about such transformation.

This special edition is an important contribution to debates about alternatives and the possibility of transformation. The issues raised offer a rich agenda for civil society mobilisation and organisation on issues raised and examined. A range of common themes emerge throughout. Levitas, Murphy and McCabe identify the importance of the care economy and the potential of strategies both to defend state supports and to reconfigure work around greater equality in the economy of care. Ryan, Healy *et al.*, and Murphy examine the potential of taxation to effect transformation, echoing a theme in Wright's own work. The central importance of the state to strategies for transformation, again a strong theme in Wright's analysis, is emphasised by Levitas, Kirby and Nolan *et al.* Inevitably, power emerges as a major issue and is central to the articles

of McCabe, Murphy and Hearne. The importance of security as a dimension of transformative strategies emerges in the contributions of Healy *et al.*, Hearne and Ryan. The impact of the environmental on the context for transformation comes through strongly in the articles by Kirby, Murphy and Ryan. Finally, a number of articles emphasis the central importance of imagination to the task of transformation as most strongly stated by Levitas and emphasised by Murphy and Kirby, again echoing a central theme of Wright.

This special issue reminds us of the reality of the highly unequal power relations embedded in finance capital and of the importance of strategy. While it seeks to be grounded and realistic about the challenges we face it is also optimistic in seeking to inspire citizens to imagine that a different Ireland is possible and that, as a society, we still have choices. We are challenged to find language that can develop both imagination and alliances. Murphy's article draws on Massey (2013) to remind us that the vocabulary we use to talk about the economy is a political construction that needs contesting; in developing the dominant hegemony right-wing political forces changed the public use of economic language and thus collective world-views. For political contestation to take place we need to question how we *think about* the economy.

New socialism emphasises the development of human beings and the satisfaction of social needs through workers' control and democratic participatory forms of production. Murphy echoes Cock's (2014) advice that to arrive there requires rethinking how we produce and consume, rethinking how we relate to nature and each other, and requires us to rethink how we understand human nature. Our choice of language and words impacts on our capacity to develop alliances around shared images of the future. We invite the reader to explore possible resistance to these transformational ideas and to think again. We are challenged to find language that can position the debate in way that it can develop imagination, alliances and ultimately, strong political coalitions.

As Wright argues, the institutional pluralism of the destination also suggests strategic pluralism in the practices of transformation. This need for institutional pluralism suggests the possibility of greater levels of respect and cooperation among different political traditions of anti-capitalism through understanding them as complementary rather than antagonistic. Some of these ideas may be within the framework of capitalism and move from neoliberal capitalism to a more social political and environmentally sustainable capitalism, others may be incompatible with capitalism and provide the seedbed for an alternative mode of production and way of organising society. We hope this special edition enhances our collective capacity to collaborate around, contribute to and initiate strategies for transformation and a sense of solidarity among all who are seeking real utopias.

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