

Erik Olin Wright 1947-2019 - The person, the friend

Friday 25 January 2019, by [BRIGHOUSE Harry](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2019).

I'm sorry to report that Erik Olin Wright has died. He was diagnosed with an acute form of leukemia last spring, and, after various interventions, has been in decline for the past few weeks. He spent his last weeks mainly in the hospital, surrounded by his family, and plentiful visits from numerous friends and former students, socializing to the end. I apologize if what follows is a little incoherent: I wasn't really ready for the news.

My own first memories of Erik long predate meeting him. The first is regular visits to the EOA bookshop on the Cowley Road when I was 16, and sitting on the floor reading *Class, Crisis and the State*, because it seemed kind of expensive to buy (John Carpenter was watching me and really not seeming to mind that I was reading an entire book though, I should say, without ever creasing it in the slightest). I later, in graduate school, wrote an essay on Analytical Marxism which I sent to *Socialist Review* only to receive a very kind rejection on the grounds that they were just about to publish an essay by Erik on the same topic (which seemed, entirely reasonable to me; even more so when I read the essay). When I later told these stories in graduate seminar we taught together he expressed disbelief that I was so much younger than him, something that might have been insulting except for the fact that, even then, he had twice the life force I have ever had. I met him on January 22nd 1992 just after my job talk at Madison: he kindly invited me to stay on for the subsequent 2 days to attend the conference on Associations and Democracy.

You'll read loads in the coming days about Erik's work as a scholar (if you feel like it). Obviously, like several CTers, his work, like that of the other Analytical Marxists, played a large role in my intellectual formation. We wrote a couple of papers together, and I'm certain I spent more time talking one-on-one about ideas with him than with anyone at Madison. But you'll probably read less about what he was like as a person, or as a friend. My children have spent almost every Thanksgiving of their lives at his house: he was an incredibly energetic and enthusiastic host, and Thanksgiving – an entirely secular celebration with which you could do whatever you wanted, was his favorite holiday. Thanksgivings were large (30, 40 people, many of whom saw each other only at Thanksgiving), unwieldy, full of food and always ending in a square dance conducted by him on the violin leading a motley band of children of various ages (in latter days including my eldest who could just about keep up with him on the fiddle), which the more demure adults (which included me) would vie with each other to retreat from.

He loved children. In his last weeks, his caringbridge site contained an entry on 'goofiness', which he said is closely related to silliness—and although he could be goofy and silly among adults, it was among children that his goofiness shone—always using silly voices, telling silly stories, making stupid jokes—always conspiring with them, rather than condescending to them. He could go from an absurd joke with a 3 year old to a deep conversation about game theory with an adult and back completely seamlessly.

He was a sentimentalist, as you'll see if you look on caringbridge. He loved music—not, really, pop

music or jazz as far as I could tell, but all sorts of classical music, folk music (especially the American tradition) and, most notably musicals, which he attended avidly. He loved The Wizard of Oz with a vengeance (which may have been because he was from Kansas, who knows?).

He was great as a mentor and friend. As a mentor. Early in my time at Madison he offered me lots of opportunities to do things that I'd never have done otherwise—things that would stretch me, but at which I'd succeed. He had great advice, rarely for me, but always good to pass on, which often involved just specific ways of seeing things. We once had in common a student with really bad writer's block; Erik commented in an offhand way that the mistake the student was making was thinking of publications as conversation-closers (everything has to be exactly right) rather than as contribution to ongoing conversations; invitations for the reader to take their thinking to the next stage. Completely useless, actually, for the student in question, but it has been fantastic advice for other students with the same problem, especially in my discipline, philosophy, which is much more culpable of perfectionism than sociology.

As a friend—when I was at my lowest he insisted that we go to mindfulness classes together. Everyone in our mindfulness class had a story—something they were trying to deal with, and several of the stories were genuinely tragic. Everyone, that is, except Erik, for whom it was a brilliant combination of leisure activity and intellectual pursuit. He excelled at meditation, and was fascinated by how it worked. To be perfectly honest, mindfulness didn't really do it for me—and yoga was worse—but the rhythm of attending, his care, and the amusement of seeing how seriously he could get into something that struck me as frivolous, really helped me a lot. In no time he was the most accomplished mindfulness practitioner in the group; something which helped him, actually, when he was dealing with biopsies and transplants.

In addition, he and Marcia are the only people other than me and my wife who met each of my three children (now 22, 17, and 12) during their first two weeks of life. (Obviously, my wife and I met them sooner than Erik and Marcia).

Oh, here's a story. In addition to being goofy (which do not have in common) he was incredibly square (a shared trait). Sometime in the late-90s Jerry Cohen came to Madison to give some talks, and Erik convinced him to do a standup performance at a local theater. The problem was that Jerry would only do the performance if he was stoned, and (understandably) refused to bring his own pot through customs. At a certain point Erik awkwardly explained the problem to me and said "Do you know how to get hold of pot?" I stared at him, thinking that he must know me less well than I had thought and said "Of course I don't! You'd know better than I would". He giggled, and we both agreed that it would make a good Onion headline "Marxist professors, the only people in Madison, Wisconsin who don't know how to procure marijuana". I can't remember how the problem was solved, but I do know that the contraband did not pass through either of our hands.

I had planned to see him today, and had planned to provide an elaborate picnic for him, his family, and other members of the September group who were flying into Milwaukee on Saturday for a farewell. My last conversation with him was warm and lovely. He called me a week or so ago because he was writing a long letter to his grandchildren, and wanted to check a fact with me: in 1969 he was arrested at a protest at the Oxford Union, and wanted to know which politician he was protesting against (there were two candidates). I reminded him I was 6 at the time, and he said "Yes, but you know all these things, so you're bound to know which one it was". I did.

Two years ago I sent a freshman student to take his American Society: How it Works class. Two days ago she sent me an email which I forwarded to his daughter yesterday. Its was one of the last things he heard: "I've been following Erik's caringbridge site and I've found it really enjoyable to read. He is really a miraculous thinker and writer. You obviously know that better than I do."

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P.S.

• JANUARY 23, 2019:

<http://crookedtimber.org/2019/01/23/erik-olin-wright-1947-2019/>