



**Sketch of the *Real Utopias* Theme and Program  
for the 2012 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association**

**Erik Olin Wright  
President, ASA**

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The theme for the 2012 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association is “Real Utopias: emancipatory projects, institutional designs, possible futures.” Many people are drawn to sociology because of moral concerns about social conditions and injustices. Those concerns are indeed reflected in much sociological research, but usually this takes the form of the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions rather than the exploration of alternatives. A great deal of scholarship focuses on explaining the sources of social injustice and the causes and consequences of undesirable social conditions; much less on what it would take to create a good society, on the design of alternatives to existing institutions that would help realize moral ideals of justice and human flourishing. The idea of “real utopias” is meant to point sociology in this direction.

The expression “Real Utopias” is, of course, an oxymoron: Utopia means “nowhere” – a fantasy world of perfect harmony and social justice. When politicians want to summarily dismiss a proposal for social transformation as an impractical dream outside the limits of possibility, they call it “utopian”. Realists reject such fantasies as a distraction from the serious business of making practical improvements in existing institutions. The idea of real utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice: “utopia” implies developing visions of alternatives to existing institutions that embody our deepest aspirations for a world in which all people have access to the conditions to live flourishing lives; “real” means taking seriously the problem of the viability of the institutions that could move us in the direction of that world. The goal is to elaborate utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible way stations, utopian designs of viable institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.

Exploring real utopias implies developing a sociology of the *possible*, not just of the *actual*. This is a tricky research problem, for while we can directly observe variation in what exists in the world, discussions of possibilities and limits of possibility always involve more speculative and contentious claims about what could be, not just what is. The task of a sociology of real utopias, then, is to develop strategies that enable us to make empirically and theoretically sound arguments about emancipatory possibilities.

Two primary kinds of research animate the agenda of real utopias. The first involves studying empirical cases that in one way or another seem to embody emancipatory aspirations and prefigure utopian alternatives. The task is to see how these cases work, to diagnose their limitations, dilemmas and unintended consequences, to examine their transferability and scalability, and to understand ways of developing their potential. The temptation in such research is to be a cheerleader, uncritically extolling the virtues of promising experiments. The danger is to be a cynic, seeing the flaws as the only reality and the potential as an illusion. The second kind of research involves elaborating theoretical investigations of alternatives that try to integrate philosophical understandings of core normative problems with theoretical models of institutional design. These models can vary in their degree of formalization from systematic mathematical models that try to specify institutional equilibria to more informal discursive models that lay out the core logic of institutional principles. A fully elaborated sociology of real utopias integrates both of these kinds of research.

The 2012 ASA annual meeting will explore a wide range of substantive problems connected to these kinds of empirical and theoretical real utopia agendas. A number of different kinds of sessions are being planned around this theme:

1. There will be three plenary sessions, during which nothing else is officially scheduled at the conference.
2. Twenty thematic panels are organized around specific proposals for real utopian institutional designs, with one primary speaker and one commentator. The descriptions for each of these twenty real utopia proposal sessions can be found at the end of this document.
3. Fifty thematic panels are organized around broad topics with 3-4 presentations. Many of these sessions were proposed by ASA members.
4. A special presidential panel to explore that broad problem of progressive social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Below is a brief sketch of each of these elements of the program.

### **1. PLENARY SESSIONS**

The plenary sessions at the ASA meetings are the most visible venues for elaborating the central ideas of the annual theme. There will be three such sessions, one on Thursday evening, August 16 (the evening before the first full day of the conference), one at noon on Friday, and one at noon on Sunday.

#### **Plenary 1. Equality**

At the core of the idea of real utopias is the problem of realizing ideals of social justice, and in one way or another, these ideals are always bound up with questions about equality. Equality is also part of the normative context for one of the central preoccupations of sociology – understanding the causes and consequences of diverse forms of inequality, especially class, gender and race. This first plenary, then, will examine various issues connecting equality and real utopias.

#### **Plenary 2. Democracy**

Many real utopian institutional designs and experiments are built around the problem of deepening democracy: how to organize decision-making in organizations, in the state, and in society in such a way that ordinary people are in a position to genuinely exercise real power. This plenary will concern different aspects of the problem of deepening and radicalizing democracy.

#### **Plenary 3. Sustainability**

Few problems pose a bigger challenge to contemporary capitalist societies than environmental sustainability. Global warming looms as potentially catastrophic, and there are good arguments that capitalism as a political-economic system is not only incapable of effectively dealing with this impending crisis, but is itself one of the core causal processes generating the problem. Yet,

there is relatively little public discussion of rigorously argued real-utopian institutional designs for dealing effectively with climate change and other aspects of environmental sustainability. This will be the theme of the third plenary.

<b>PLENARY SESSIONS</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
<b>Plenary I. Equality</b>		
1. Class	Philippe van Parijs	Louvain-le-Neuve, Belgium
2. Gender	Judith Lorber	CUNY Graduate center
3. Race	Kimberle Crenshaw	UCLA Law
<b>Plenary II. Democracy</b>		
1. A Democratic Media System	Bob McChesney	U. Illinois
2. Experiments in direct democracy	Hilary Wainwright	Red Pepper magazine, London
3. The Citizenship Agenda	Bruce Ackerman	Yale Law School
4. Democratizing democracy	Boaventura Santos	Coimbra University, Portugal
<b>Plenary III. Sustainability</b>		
1. The Environment	Paul Ehrlich	Stanford University
2. Prosperity without Growth	Tim Jackson	University of Surrey
3. Agro-food systems	Harriet Friedmann	U. Toronto

## **2. REAL UTOPIA PROPOSALS SESSIONS**

Each of these sessions will revolve around a proposal for a real utopian institutional design to resolve some domain of problems. Examples would include such things as: unconditional basic income, market socialism, equality-sustaining parental leaves, participatory budgets, random-selection democratic assemblies, worker cooperatives, stakeholder corporations, solidarity finance, democratic media, etc. For each of these sessions there will be an anchor person who has worked extensively on formulating such real utopia designs (rather than simply a person who has thought critically about the theme) and is prepared to write an essay laying out the rationale and core elements of the institutional proposal.

These institutional proposal sessions will be organized as follows:

- There will be a dedicated interactive website for these sessions.
- The person who anchors these sessions will prepare an elaborated proposal for institutional designs on their topic which will be posted online by early 2012. While of course these essays will include some discussion of what is wrong with existing structures and institutions, the goal is for the essay to sketch the central contours of alternatives. This does not generally mean a detailed “institutional blueprint”, but rather a careful elaboration of the core principles of an institutional proposal. The expectation is that these will be in the 8,000-10,000 word range, although some could be longer.
- In some sessions there could be two competing or contrasting proposals. Having two different proposals could make for a very lively session for some topics. We will discuss with the anchor for the session whether such a counter-point proposal would be a good approach to the session.
- The website will allow for comments and dialogue so that these proposals can be part of a discussion prior to the meeting. This website will be set up by the ASA and will be widely advertised in the ASA Newsletter (*Footnotes*), the ASA homepage, and the Annual Meeting homepage.
- At the session there will be a brief – around 20 minutes – presentation of the proposal by the anchor person and one other presentation. This can be a commentary, a critique, or, if appropriate, a contrasting proposal. We want these panels to have lots of time for debate and discussion from the floor, so we want to limit the presentations, but we also want some kind of intellectual tension in the sessions. We will discuss with the anchor person for the session what specific format would be most interesting. If the anchor person would like to have two commentators, we can also accommodate that.
- In *Footnotes*, section newsletters, and other modes of information dissemination we will encourage people to look at the proposals before the meeting and to come to sessions with issues they want to raise. While of course we want to avoid long-winded speeches from the floor, somewhat longer than usual interventions from the audience could be constructive.

Some of these Real Utopias proposals (eg. unconditional basic income) will also be presented in plenary sessions planned for the conference. When this happens we plan to have a complementary thematic session in which the proposal will also be discussed, since at the plenary sessions there is not generally much time for serious discussion.

<b>REAL UTOPIAS PROPOSAL SESSIONS</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Author of anchor essay</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
1. Unconditional Basic Income	Philippe van Parijs	University of Louvain, Belgium
2. A Democratic Media System	Robert McChesney	U. Illinois
3. The Public University as a Real Utopia	Michael Burawoy	U.C. Berkeley
4. Utopias “for Real”: contours of racial utopia	Eduard Bonilla-Silva	Duke University
5. Philanthropy and Real Utopia	Rob Reich	Stanford University
6. Parecon (participatory economics)	Michael Albert	Z-magazine
7. Democratizing finance	Fred Block	U.C. Davis
8. Reviving Democratic Citizenship	Bruce Ackerman	Yale Law School
9. Making Direct Democracy Deliberative through Random Assemblies	John Gastil	U. Washington
10. Reimagining the Corporation	Gerald Davis	U. Michigan
11. Designs and Dilemmas of Participatory budgeting	Gianpaolo Baiocchi	Brown University
12. Work-Family Reconciliation Policies and Gender Equality	Janet Gornick	CUNY Grad Center
13. A World Beyond Gender	Judith Lorber & Barbara Risman	CUNY Grad. Center University of Illinois-Chicago
14. Real Utopian Foodshed Governance	Harriet Friedmann	U. Toronto
15. From a Transparent State to a Transparent Society	Archon Fung	JFK School, Harvard
16. Productive Democracy	Joel Rogers	U. Wisconsin
17. A Democratic-egalitarian System of Public Education (two proposals)	Harry Brighouse Michael Fielding and Peter Moss	U. Wisconsin Institute of Education, London
18. Postfossil Conversion and Free Public Transport	Mario Candeias	Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin
19. Practical Anarchism in Networked Society	Yochai Benkler	Harvard Law School
20. Corporations with Worker-Ownership and Profit-Sharing	Joseph Blasi	Rutgers University
21. Lessons from the Israeli Kibbutzim	Uri Leviatan	Western Gallile College, Israe

### **3. THEMATIC PANELS AROUND BROAD TOPICS**

The second group of thematic panels will be organized around topics rather than proposals. The idea here is still to explore these topics in a way linked to the agenda of real utopias, but there is no expectation that the discussions will involve detailed proposals for new institutions. These sessions are an opportunity to explore the normative dimensions of various topics, critiques of existing social arrangements and institutions, the directions for social change implied by those critiques and social struggles for the creation of alternatives. Some of these sessions will explore methodological issues around developing a sociology of the possible and the history of utopian thinking within sociology. These sessions will also include many of the thematic panels proposed directly by ASA members.

In terms of format, I would generally like these sessions to have three presentations (rather than the typical four or five) so that there will be ample time for discussion. In general I also prefer panels without official “discussants” – my experience is that it is usually more interesting to have discussion from the floor unless the discussant is really engaged in a debate with a specific argument (as in the proposal sessions). Nevertheless, if the organizer of the session has other preferences, this is fine.

*List of topics for general thematic sessions (session organizers in parentheses)*

1. Beyond Consumerism: the emergence of sustainable consumption cultures (Juliet Schor)
2. Workers’ search for utopia (Howard Kimmeldorf and Barry Eidlin)
3. Reforming Carework (Nancy Folbre)
4. Worker-Owned Cooperatives: Transformative possibilities and constraints (Marta Soler, Barcelona, and Ofer Sharone, United States)
5. Marxism and Real Utopias (Rhonda Levine)
6. Global Warming and the Prospects for Real Utopia (Robert Bruelle)
7. Utopia and the Future of the family (Judith Treas, UC-Irvine)
8. Exploring Sexual Possibilities (Virginia Rutter)
9. Real Utopian Childhood (Karin Martin)
10. Sustainable Cities (Michael Goldman)
11. Race and Racial Justice (Sandra Smith)
12. Utopian Visions, Surprising Consequences (Mamie Goldman)
13. Alternatives to Contemporary Agro-Food Systems (Isidor Wallimann)
14. Peer-to-Peer Collaborative Production Systems (Denise Anthony)
15. Real Utopias Data Systems and Performance Metrics (Jerry Jacobs)
16. Democratizing Global Governance (Christopher Chase-Dunn)
17. Borderless World (John Urrey)
18. Creating Workplace Gender Equality (William Bielby)
19. Is Marriage part of a Utopian Future? (Pepper Schwartz)
20. Religion and Utopia: a contradiction in terms? (Orit Avishai)
21. Post-Globalization Paths: Emergence, Possibility, and Unthinkability (Philip McMichael)
22. Building a Better K-12 Education System (Jennifer Jennings)
23. Visions of Feminist Academy (Joey Sprague)

24. Improving America: lessons from the civilized world (Salvatore Babones)
25. Alternatives Communities for the Aging (Natalia Sarkisian)
26. Real Utopias behind Prison Walls (Michael Jacobson)
27. Alternative Approaches to Punishment (Katherine Beckett)
28. Contemporary LGBT Sexualities and Social Justice (Mignon Moore)
29. Alternative Currencies: economic empowerment and community building from the grassroots (Ed Collom)
30. Fair Trade: institutionalizing real utopias in global commodity networks (Laura Raynolds)
31. Real Utopian Visions of Health Care (Suzanne Gordon)
32. The Social and Solidarity Economy: Perspectives from Quebec, Europe, Latin America and East Asia (Marguerite Mendell)
33. The future of reproduction (Frances Kissling)
34. Real Utopian Lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jess Gilbert)
35. Democracy's Blueprints: the Globalization of Participatory Budgeting (Ernesto Ganuza)
36. Islamic Utopias (Charles Kurzman)
37. Another World is Possible: The Utopian Vision of the World Social Forum (Lauren Langman)
38. Art's New Promise: emancipation, empowerment, enlightenment, or it is just economics? (Karen Coleman)
39. Dystopian and Unreal Utopias (George Steinmetz)
40. Undoing Gender: is it possible? Is it desirable? (Kristen Schilt)
41. Creating real utopias for Persons with disabilities (Jeffrey Houser)
42. Virtual utopias and dystopias (A. Aneesh)
43. High Road Capitalism (Andrew Shrank and Josh Whitford)
44. Assessing the Impact of Social Networking and Mobile Internet Access (Barry Wellman)
45. Practicing Freedom in the classroom: toward a sociology of critical pedagogy (Patricia Hill Collins)
46. Design, Architecture and Real Utopia (Damian White)
47. Robust Empowerment and grassroots activism (John Gaventa)
48. Caregiving for the Elderly: a vision for the future (Christine Himes)
49. New Ways to Organize: recent successes for Direct Care Workers (Heidi Hartman)
50. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Port Huron Statement (Richard Flacks)

#### **4. SPECIAL PRESIDENTIAL PANEL**

There will be one featured Presidential Panel on the broad theme "What does it mean to be a progressive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" This discussion will not be specifically framed in terms of real utopias, but will explore the broader political and philosophical issues involved in the idea of progress and progressive social change. The panel will have three speakers: Claus Offe, Göran Therborn and Fran Piven