

Erik Olin Wright ASA President Journal

I was elected president of the American Sociological Association in the spring of 2010. I got the news from the ASA secretary, Don Tomaskovic-Devy, while watching a movie on DVD with Marcia. I had been nominated the previous autumn, had agreed to run in the spring election, prepared my formal “personal statement” for the election, sent the ASA a photo Marcia took of me, and that was it. I was “running against” Karen Cook, a very prominent sociologist at Stanford who was certainly an appropriate person for the ASA Presidency. We were not in any meaningful sense rivals or competitors – our respective research is located in completely different corners of the discipline. But still, elections in the ASA are always contested, unlike in some other academic associations in which the nominating committee only nominates one person for each position, even though no one really “campaigns”.

Once I agreed to run, I really did want to win. The timing was perfect. I had just finished a super-intensive period of writing, publishing both *Envisioning real Utopias* and *American Society: how it really works* in 2010. I had lots of things in the works, but no all-consuming project. As president of the ASA I would be in a position to promote the broad agenda of Real Utopias to the discipline. Of course there are also issues of ego-gratification here – being president is a collective affirmation of what I have done, of my prominence in the discipline. My anticipatory excitement about the possibility, however, had mainly to do with what I could do as president, rather than the fame & glory it involves.

So, it was really wonderful to get the call and to begin figuring out what I wanted to do and how I wanted to proceed. As far as I can tell, ASA presidents generally do not put a huge amount of time and effort into developing an agenda or mission for the presidency. They treat it as an honor, pick a theme for the thematic part of the program, and then with their program committee fill a bunch of panels. Mostly that is it. Occasionally, though, a president wants to really use the platform of being president to accomplish something, to help bring some kind of agenda to the discipline. This is what Michael Burawoy did in 2004 when he pushed the idea of a “Public Sociology” throughout the time he was president. My mission, of course, is “Real Utopias”. I don’t want this to be understood just in the way I have framed the issues in *Envisioning*, but as an expansive umbrella for exploring alternative institutions and social structures that embody emancipatory ideals, visions, that put substance on the slogan “another world is possible”. I want progressive of all flavors who are concerned with social justice issues to give more attention to solutions rather than just the critique of oppression. And I want this to become a central research problem. My hope – fantasy? – is that as president of the ASA I can add legitimacy to this sort of work and clarity to what it means to study real utopian alternatives. That’s what I want to do.

The official responsibilities of ASA president go for three years – one year as president-elect, one as president and one as part-president. During all three years the president is on the Executive Office Board (EOB) and ASA Council [not *the* ASA Council, but just plain: ASA Council, or Council for short....], serving as chair of Council during the middle year. In the first year the

program committee meets twice, which the president also chairs, and in the second year the president is also on the ASA publications committee. So there are lots of trips to Washington, D.C. for these events. During the Presidential year there is also the possibility of the ASA sponsoring talks at regional sociology conferences and other occasions. I think I will take advantage of as many of those opportunities as I can.

Annual ASA Meeting, Atlanta, August 13-18, 2010

I arrived at the ASA meetings in Atlanta with great anticipation. I had been elected President of the ASA in June, and this was the first occasion for me to encounter old friends and colleagues, and former students. Many people came up to me to congratulate me; some said, jokingly, that they were sure whether to offer congratulations or condolences. Lots of people seemed very excited and enthusiastic about my theme, but of course people who were grumpy about the idea of real utopias would be much less likely to seek me out. I know this will be a lot of work, but I'm totally psyched, totally pumped about it. It is a chance to present to the discipline the ideas I care most about. I want to do this in a way that is exciting, engaging, inclusive.

Early in the conference I had a lovely conversation with Melvin Kohn, a former president of the ASA, probably around 80 years old or so. Mel has always been one of my big supporters. He is a social psychologist who has worked on things like work alienation, work autonomy and cognitive complexity, class and conformity. 30 years ago he used some of my ideas about class in his own work. Anyway, when he saw me he said: "Most presidents are most excited when they are done with being president, but in your case I think for both you and the association the excitement will be while you are president."

In the course of the four days of the meeting I periodically had waves of very strong emotion. I don't want to sound too soupy about this, but I had the kind of warm feelings of fullness that I associate with family – a sense of being in a community of people I care about and care for. I sat in some sessions and relished the earnestness and sense of purpose I saw in the students and young scholars, even if I wasn't all that interested in the papers being presented. I have made my life in Sociology for 40 years. It has given me much – a disciplinary home that gave me space to do my thing, an intellectual environment that became pluralistic enough to tolerate and sometimes value the Marxist ideas with which I grappled, eager students to teach and from whom to learn. I know it is not like this everywhere – so my experience of the world of sociology is also heavily shaped by the more specific experience of the academic life in Wisconsin. Still, I have grown up within sociology and I feel great affection for this community. This is also why I am pumped up for the task of creating an exciting and passionate event for 2012.

On Monday afternoon I met for the first time with my program committee. I think it will be a terrific group of people. I picked six of them:

- Ron Aminzade, my very close buddy from Minnesota

- Rhonda Levine, a lively, funny, engaging old friend who teaches at Colgate
- Barbara Risman, a delightful no-nonsense feminist who wrote a terrific book called *Gender Vertigo* and always has interesting things to say
- Carmen Siriani, from U. Mass Amherst who works on civic associations and community development
- Sandra Smith, an African-American faculty member from Berkeley who works on race and class and has been involved in lots of ASA activities and who I have known a bit from my Berkeley visits
- Heidi Hartman, one of the important figures from the women's movement and feminist theory since the 1970s, not in a university, working in women's advocacy and research
- Jerry Jacobs, a family demographer at Penn, active in everything, and a former ASR editor so he knows the discipline and has lots of different networks,
- Elizabeth Anderson, a young sociologist from Michigan who works on sexuality and gender issues, who I don't really know but everyone says is wonderful.

They are all people who broadly share my values and sensibilities and who, I think, will have lots of good ideas for the program. They also seem like a very lively and funny crowd: lots of laughing is important. The elected vice-president, Edward Telles, and the elected Secretary of the ASA, Catherine Berheid, are also on the committee. I don't know them, but they both seem very congenial. I think the meetings will be fun as well as productive.

In the first meeting we already came up with some good ideas for new ways of doing the thematic panels. I presented the idea of having 10-15 Thematic sessions built around proposals for institutional designs for specific real utopian transformations. Each would be written by a leading proponent and posted online in early 2012. I will develop a website for this purpose which will be linked to the ASA site. The idea is that participants at the meeting in Denver will have a chance to read these proposals ahead of time as a way of facilitating discussion in the session. At the session the presenter will give a relatively short exposition about the proposal which will be followed by at most two comments (perhaps none), also short, so that there will be at least one hour for discussion from the floor. There is also a good possibility that the proposals will be posted on the blog *Crooked Timber*. We also talked about having some thematic sessions organized around a film – I can think of one on the Kibbutz, and another on community democratic initiatives, *Holding Ground*.

Rhonda Levine thought I needed a subtitle for the theme. She felt "Real Utopias" might suggest something too elusive and dreamy. I think she's probably right. She threw out a good suggestion, which I then tweaked, so for the moment here's the full title:

"Real Utopias: emancipatory projects, institutional designs, possible futures."

I think this is pretty good. It points to three critical aspects of the real utopias idea: emancipatory projects refers to actual efforts at building another world; institutional designs points to the problem of how to organize the new institutions in a way that accomplishes emancipatory goals; and possible futures embraces the openness of the paths ahead.

On the day after the conference was over, Wednesday the 18th, I attended the meeting of the ASA Council – the governing body of the association. I will serve as a voting member of the council for three years and as head of the council for one. Or rather, as they seem to say, as head of Council. It seems that the definite article gets dropped. I enjoyed the meeting even though, I think, it probably counts as a fabled “boring meeting,” or mostly boring anyway since nearly all of the decisions were rubber stamping obvious matters: proposals from various committees, recommendations from the Executive Office, etc. But I even found those OK. I found it nice to be inside one the workings of the organization that looks out for the wellbeing of the discipline, that is dedicated to the idea that Sociology matters and it is worth figuring out what to do organizationally to help it along. So, for example, we had to discuss the location of the annual meeting in 2017. The Executive Board had bids from two cities – New York and Montreal. Both had what were described as attractive packages. We talked about the criteria for selection. A prior Council had mandated that to the extent possible we should rotate meetings from East to Middle to West of the country, and then have regular meetings outside of the “big three” – NY, SF & Chicago. Also, I learned that there is a tradition since the early 80s of having a meeting in Canada roughly once a decade. So, the choice for 2017 was between NY and Montreal. It was time for a Canadian meeting. On the other hand, meetings in Canada get less attendance because of hassles, and foreign students in the US sometimes have visa issues coming back to the US. But then bringing in foreign guests and speakers is easier because Canada has much less restrictive and annoying visa rules. One council member kept emphasizing that in NY there is always 700-1000 more people coming and probably 1500 more than Montreal. That seems important. But someone else pointed out that moving the meetings around meant that different people came to meetings, people for whom NY was too expensive or too far. There was also a further complication: if we agreed to have the meeting in Montreal both in 2017 and in 2024, the Montreal convention center would give us a better deal in 2017 which would save roughly \$135,000. That is a lot of money in terms of the costs to the association and would help keep the registration fees down. But a number of people felt awkward tying the hands of future Councils by locking in a meeting 14 years hence. So, when we voted, we agreed to Montreal for 2017 but not 2024. The second vote was very close 9 to 7 with one abstention. I abstained because I couldn’t figure out how to weigh things. At lunch, at one table, people kept talking about the issue, and afterwards one of them who had voted against Montreal for 2024 asked for a reconsideration. According to Roberts Rules of Order, if a person who votes on the winning side of an issue asks for a reconsideration, then this has to occur without debate. So the discussion went on, and with good deliberation it became much clearer that it was worth the \$130,000 to lock things in and that it really didn’t much constrain future Councils. So the re-vote was 17 to 3 in favor of Montreal. I liked the process a lot: real dialogue of the form that changes people’s minds.

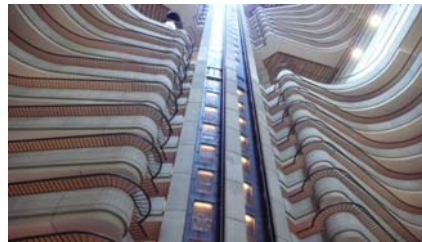
At lunch I had a wonderful playful conversation with the people at my table. There was something a little different going on for me, in a way: I like telling stories and talking at gatherings like this, telling vignettes, discussing ideas, etc. But I also don’t want to monopolize the discussion – not like when I was younger. I am very attentive (or try to be) about other people’s need to say things and define the agenda of a relaxing conversation, and I feel uncomfortable when it seems people are somehow deferring to me. But at this lunch, it

seemed that whenever I asked a question to direct the conversation away from something I had been talking about before, we ended up drifting back to me. It was a bit like I was holding court, although of course much more relaxed and meandering than that sounds. Anyway, I told people about the trip to Bogota – in order to explain why I would have to leave early – and then mentioned *The Chess Game* film that I was going to show. Someone had an iPhone and so instantly called up YouTube and bingo: there was the film. We watched it and I described its message. One of the people at the table, Jennifer Lee, said I should show it in my Presidential address. I said I didn't want to do something that would seem self-indulgent. No, she said, people would love it, and it would show that you've been thinking about these issues for over 40 years, and that would be interesting. We talked about how this would work. I said that one way of framing the film would be to say that the pawns thought that just getting rid of the ruling class would be sufficient to be able to dance a square dance – to live their lives by different rules than chess – but that they failed to change the institutions, represented by the board itself. The institutions then regenerated the old game, just with new people. Or something like that. I do want the address to be memorable – to be engaging and exciting but also intellectually important. Perhaps the film could be a good thing. I have two years to mull it over.

The president this year is Randy Collins. He is a well-known sociologist who mainly writes books on theory in one way or another. He is prolific and well regarded. His topic for the 2011 ASA is Social Conflict, which could be pretty interesting depending upon how it plays out. He was engaged in what turned out to be an interesting, and somewhat surprising, debate at the ASA annual business meeting – an open meeting for members on Tuesday morning which reviews certain kinds of proposals before they go to the Council. At the meeting a resolution was submitted by the Section on the Sociology of childhood concerning the UN convention on the rights of the child. In the ASA official Mission Statement there is a paragraph expressing support for human rights and endorsing the UN convention on human rights. The resolution asked that explicit support for the UN Convention on the rights of children be added. 194 countries have ratified that treaty; only the US has not. Randy spoke against the resolution on the grounds that the UN convention defined children as under 18 and that this binary notion of adults vs children is nonsense sociologically since teenagers are so different from children. He gave the example of an 18 year boy going to prison for statutory rape for having sex with his 16 year old girlfriend. He felt strongly that as a professional sociology association we should not be endorsing political stands that in some way embodied bad sociology. (Of course he wasn't opposed to the fundamental idea of human rights applied specifically to the needs of children, just to the poor framing of the problem because of binary notion of child vs adult). I personally felt that these considerations, while interesting in the abstract, were not really relevant to the issue of endorsing the UN convention on the rights of children, which are mainly designed to affirm the right of children for food, shelter, healthcare, education, nurturance, security, etc. The problem was triggered because one of the rights is the right not to be sexually abused (or something like that), and the binary criterion did face problems there. Randy felt that we needed more time to discuss this. Nevertheless, the resolution was voted 25 to 2 (there was another man sitting with Randy who also spoke against the resolution) and sent to the Council for discussion. I missed the discussion in Council on the resolution today, but I'll find out if he

voted against it there. [note from later: it ended up not being discussed, postponed to a future meeting]

One last thing about the meeting: Normally the hotels in which ASA meetings are held are standard, cookie cutter Hiltons. Perfectly fine and functional, but nothing to remark on. This year's ASA was held at the Hilton – fine and functional as usual – but also at a Marriot joined by a skybridge. The interior of the Marriot was pretty wild: 45 stories of interior tiered open hallways to an immense interior. I am sure from an environmental point of view this is an absurd structure – the cooling bill must be staggering in Atlanta in August. But it was visually Stunning.



Bogotá, Colombia, August 18-22

I had a long-standing invitation to give some lectures in Bogotá, Colombia on August 19, so I had to leave the ASA Council meeting early. Details of the trip are in a separate journal.

Fall 2010

In the fall I decided it would be a good idea to write a kind of letter-to-the-editor to appear in each of the ASA section newsletters. There are roughly 50 formal ASA sections. These are key organization units of the association, reflecting the full gambit of interests and styles of work in the discipline. Some of these have large membership and are very active, organizing mini-conferences, many sessions at the annual ASA meetings, sometimes even running journals. Others do little more than organize a couple of sessions at the annual meeting. It takes a petition with 300 ASA members willing to join to form a section, but generally when section membership slides below that level it continues, at least for a while.

So, I thought I would send a letter to appear in each newsletter. What I did was compose a general letter talking about the theme, and then add a specific paragraph saying something about how the theme might be engaged by the section in question. This turned out to be an interesting “homework” assignment. It gave me a chance to think about the discipline as a whole and how my preoccupations might be relevant to areas quite distant from mine. For some sections – like political sociology, sociology of religion, economic sociology, and Marxist sociology -- the task was simple, but for others coming up with something relevant was more of a challenge – animals and society, and the body and embodiment were not so easy.

Here is the set of paragraphs that I wrote:

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning seems like an especially fertile arena for thinking about these issues, both because many people try to experiment with more emancipatory forms of pedagogy in their teaching practices and because teaching about alternative possible worlds is an interesting way of teaching sociology.

Methodology

The section on Methodology might not seem like the most congenial for the theme of Real Utopias, but I think there are actually a range of very interesting and challenging methodological issues linked to the idea of envisioning real utopias: What does it mean to construct a sociology of the possible, not just the actual? Can the idea of “limits of possibility” be given rigorous empirical content? What is the role of computer simulations and related methodologies to exploring alternative institutional designs? And so on.

Medical Sociology

Medical Sociology seems like an especially interesting arena for thinking about real utopias, both because of a range of themes connected to medical systems – such as alternative healing practices and the institutional design of health care systems – and because of issues connected to health/illness, mind/body and wellness. My hope is that there are people in the Medical Sociology section who will creatively elaborate proposals for panels touching on such themes (and of course others that I have not thought of).

Crime, Law, & Deviance

I think the Crime, Law and Deviance section is a particularly challenging domain to think about real utopias, since so much of the discussion of crime -- and especially of punishment -- has a distinctly dystopian character. It would be really interesting, from my point of view anyway, if there was a panel exploring ideal, emancipatory ways of dealing with these issues.

Sociology of Education

The Sociology of Education section seems like an especially exciting arena for thinking about real utopias, both because education is such a hot button issue in contemporary politics, but also because the organization of

education and schooling is such a constructive arena in which to explore experiments, innovations, alternative ways of doing things.

Family

The Sociology of the family section seems like an especially engaging and challenging arena for thinking about real utopias, both because education is such a hot button issue in contemporary politics, but also because feminist discussion have devoted so much energy to rethinking the family as an institution and imaging alternative forms. Because the family takes on such varied forms and has undergone such dramatic transformations in recent decades, it doesn't have the taken-for-grantedness of many institutions which make it harder to think about them in real utopian terms.

Orgs, Occupation and Work

The Sociology of Organizations, Occupations and Work section is rich arena for thinking about real utopias, especially since the question of the forms of governance of organizations and the character of work life has played such a big part in critical thinking about contemporary institutions. This is also a terrific domain for empirically exploring the problem of real utopias because there is so much empirical variation and experimentation with alternative ways of organizing work, participation, and governance in organizations of all sorts.

Theory

The Sociological Theory section is an interesting domain for thinking about real utopias. I would love to see panels on threads of utopian, dystopian and anti-utopian thinking in sociology, for example, or discussions of the epistemological foundations for "real utopian" sociology. My hope is that there are people in the Theory section who will creatively elaborate proposals for panels touching on such themes (and of course others that I have not thought of).

Sex and Gender

The theoretical and empirical concerns of the Sex and Gender section constitute an especially important arena for thinking about real utopias. On the one hand one of the most important theoretical traditions concerned with sex and gender, feminism, provides one of the strongest intellectual and normative frameworks for emancipatory social theory. But I also think the broad area of sex and gender is an intriguing context for thinking about real utopias because of the way it links the most intimate aspects of human life with social structural and cultural questions of the family, work and other more macro contexts.

Community & Urban Sociology

The theoretical and empirical concerns of the community and Urban Sociology section constitute an especially engaging arena for thinking about real utopias. The idea of a revitalized sense of community has always been at the heart of utopian thinking, and many of the most interesting "prefigurative" real utopian experiments occur in urban cities. I'm thinking, for example of the participatory budgeting innovations in Brazil and elsewhere, for example.

Social Psychology

Social Psychology might not, at first glance, seem like an area of sociology closely linked to the problem of envisioning real utopias. Most of the work on this theme (especially, perhaps, in the way I have explored the topic) has revolved around institutional design and macro-issues of social structure, power and inequality. Nevertheless, I believe that some of the traditional concerns of social psychology are of fundamental importance for understanding the possibility of emancipatory alternatives to existing social realities. The problem of altruism and cooperative norms, for example, is an important theme in social psychology and bears heavily on the design of more egalitarian and democratic institutions. More broadly, the issue of the formation and transformation of beliefs, values and norms about desirable and possible social arrangements is central to the very notion of real utopian alternatives.

Peace, War, & Social Conflict

Peace, War and Conflict is obviously one of the pivotal moral issues that drive people to think about real utopian alternatives to the world as we know it. And yet, I think, there has been relatively less systematic attention given to the question of institutional designs for dealing with problems of war and peace than around many other utopian concerns – like social justice or democratic equality. I would therefore be especially eager to see the Peace, War and Conflict section take the opportunity of the 2012 ASA meeting theme to explore the problem of institutional designs for a peaceful world.

Environment & Technology

There are few topics that are of more pressing concern today than environmental destruction – not just the issue of global warming, but the full gambit of environmental issues that confront the world today. While I am not thoroughly versed in the literature on these problems, it is my sense that most of the critical work focuses on the character of the problems, the social forces that have created the problems and are arrayed against finding solutions, and the failure of governments in general to act in an effective manner to deal with them. Less attention (I believe) has been devoted to a systematic exploration of the redesign of social institutions in ways that could sustainably move us in a different direction. There is, of course, discussion of the way we should behave towards the environment – of the principles, values, and norms that should govern our interactions with nature if we want an environmentally sustainable future – but not so much on the institutions that would structure such behavior in ways to make such sustainability possible. This is what I think of as the guts of the distinctively sociological analysis of environmental crisis: how social structures and institutions affect the practices of people (through constraints and facilitations) and therefore the prospects for effectively dealing with environmental issues. The real utopia problem, then, is elaborating models of transformations of those institutions in ways that alter these constraints and facilitations. I would like the problem of the environment, energy, global warming, etc., to be at center stage in the 2012 ASA meetings. I am hoping that one of the plenary sessions will deal directly with this domain of issues. My hope, then, is that there are people in the Environment and Technology section who will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting, both within the section and in the more general program.

Marxist Sociology

There is no section at the ASA whose central theoretical preoccupations is closer to what I mean by “real utopias.” My own thinking on this problem has grown directly out of my efforts to grapple systematically with certain key theoretical problems within the Marxist tradition, especially the issue of what it means institutionally and structurally to transcend capitalism and realize socialism as a possible future. I know that there are hot debates over these ideas – and some of my sharpest critics are Marxists who see that I have abandoned some core foundations of Marxism in talking about “real utopias.” I consider my work on this theme to remain firmly embedded in the Marxist tradition, but of course there are legitimate grounds for disagreeing with this. In any case, I am hoping that members of the Marxist section enthusiastically embrace this theme for the 2012 meeting through discussions of alternative visions of socialism, the problem of prefigurative institutional transformations within capitalism, the relevance of various contemporary developments (Venezuela, Bolivia, the Zapatistas, etc.) for socialism, the utopian strands within the Marxist tradition, and so on.

Racial & Ethnic Minorities

I think issues connected to the study of racial and ethnic minorities pose constructive and difficult challenges to thinking about “real utopias.” Most critical writing on issues of race and ethnicity focus on the nature of the oppressions connected to these social categories, the social processes which reproduce and undermine such oppression, and the struggle of people against such oppression. The normative concerns are animated by commitments to social justice and social emancipation, but less attention is usually given to the real utopia question of what kinds of institutions are needed to fully realize the normative goals embodied in the critique of existing institutions. Are there aspects of the ideal design such institutions that reflect distinctive characteristics of racial and ethnic relations? The answer to this question involves a wide range of considerations, including, among other things, issues of identity and multiculturalism, the question of the appropriate response to historical legacies of injustice, and the relationship between recognition and redistribution as dimensions of social justice.

Comparative/Historical Soc

There are a number of interesting ways in which the theme of “real utopias” is of relevance to the Comparative and Historical Sociology section of the ASA. Perhaps the most obvious is the role of utopian ideas in various historical processes and movements, but I also think it would be interesting to have discussions on the various historical experiments in intentional communities, both in the United States and Elsewhere. The analysis of the 20th century efforts on revolutionary transformations from above could also be framed in a way relevant to the real utopias theme. And I am sure there are many other topics that members of the Comparative and Historical sociology section could think of.

Sociology of Law

In my own work on real utopias I really haven't paid much attention to issues in the sociology of law, but clearly the law and judicial institutions are critical to the problem of thinking about alternatives to existing institutions. I have been struck, for example, how legal innovations like copyleft, the Creative Commons, and GNU General Public Licenses function as instruments to partially counter the recent strengthening of intellectual property rights. These innovations help protect the new social spaces created by internet and open up possibilities for more expansive, commons-based forms of knowledge and cultural production. Clearly there is much more to be said about the law and real utopias.

Political Sociology

Because of the way the state and politics are so deeply implicated in the problem of creating fundamental alternatives to existing social institutions, political sociology is at the center of the problem of envisioning real utopias. One of the preoccupations of my own work on this theme has been institutional innovations for deepening democracy, especially innovations that embody some elements of direct citizen participation and empowerment. As you will see in the discussion of plenary sessions below, the problem of radical democracy will be featured in at least one plenary panel, and many of my initial thoughts on thematic panels revolve around different aspects of democratic institutions and transformations. My hope is that there are many people in the Political Sociology section who will be excited by the theme and creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting. It is an opportunity to think very expansively about some of the fundamental political problems of our time.

Sociology of Culture

There are many ways in which the Sociology of Culture bears on the problem of envisioning real utopias. One common argument is that a central obstacle (perhaps even the central obstacle) to a more egalitarian and democratic world lies in the nature of contemporary culture and the specific ways in which it shapes values and identities. Marxist-inspired discussions of ideological hegemony also often emphasize cultural themes in their account of the reproduction of existing relations of domination, and at least some of these discussions also pose the problem of counter-hegemony as part of the process of transformation. More broadly I think the question of the conditions under which cultural forms that sustain oppressive social relations can be challenged and eroded is fundamental to the problem of realizing emancipatory alternatives. I am especially intrigued by analyses of innovative cultural practices that prefigure fundamental alternatives and how the social space for such practices can be enlarged.

Communication and Information

The broad area of communications and information is one of the most interesting and dynamic for the theme of real utopias. The digital revolution, the emergence of the internet, the proliferation of what Yochai Benkler calls commons-based peer-to-peer production, and many other developments suggest dramatically new ways of living and working. But equally, the strengthening of intellectual property rights, the erosion of newspaper journalism, the consolidation of the mass media ownership and other developments seem to erode possibilities for an open and democratic information system. So, there are many important issues that connect communications and information to real utopian possibilities.

Science, Knowledge & Technology

The theme of Real Utopias deeply intersects area of Science, Knowledge and Technology. One of the hallmarks of

modernity is the hope – and also the myth – that technology itself offers a real utopian future. Science, in its self-understanding of its internal practices and organization (if not, of course, in its actual conduct) aspires to realize the ideals of a domination-free realm of communication where only reason and the better argument prevail. Sociological research on science and technology often seeks to debunk such complacent views, but nevertheless, even in the debunking there is often an affirmation of the ideals themselves. Recent institutional innovations such as “consensus conferences” raise a range of issues about the possibilities for deepening democratic participation in technology policy. There is thus a great deal to think about in terms of the subject matter of the Science, Knowledge and Technology Section and the Real Utopias theme of the 2012 ASA meetings.

Children & Youth

The problem of children and youth raises fundamental normative questions about the meaning of social justice and sociological questions about how alternative designs of social institutions impact the lives of children. In classical liberalism, children were virtually ignored in discussions of social justice, but in at least some contemporary understandings of social justice, they play a pivotal role. The idea of “equality of opportunity” as the core principle of justice, for example, has its greatest salience when it is posed about the lives of children. There are, however, other issues around childhood that get much less attention in theories of justice, namely the value of the quality of life of children independently of how this might affect their “opportunities” later in life. Too often, in my judgment, discussions of poverty, inequality and social justice largely treat the lives of children instrumentally in terms of consequences for their lives as adults rather than as a morally salient problem in its own right. Once this wider set of normative issues is raised, the real utopia question then becomes: what kinds of institutions best promote flourishing lives for children? Are there tensions and trade-offs between the institutional conditions for equality of opportunity and the conditions for a high quality of life in childhood? How important is it that conditions for flourishing be promoted through the family, or can institutional arrangements outside of the family effectively compensate for deficits in the family’s provision of flourishing? These and many other questions (including many issues I have not thought about!) are the kinds of things that can be explored under the rubric of real utopias.

Economic Sociology

Economic sociology provides one of the best contexts for looking at empirical as well as theoretical issues connected to the theme of real utopias. A central element in the agenda of real utopias is looking for social forms that are prefigurative of more fundamental, emancipatory alternatives to existing institutions, and the economy is one of the best domains in which to find relevant examples. Worker-owned cooperatives are a classic example. In the mid-19th century Prodhoun argued that they were the essential building blocks of an alternative to capitalism. Marx disagreed, not because he felt that they didn’t in certain important ways prefigure an alternative, but because he felt capitalism would inevitably thwart their growth. In the 21st century worker cooperatives remain an alternative model, although one generally confined to small niches within the capitalist economy. Economic sociology is also concerned with issues of alternative systems of corporate governance, worker participation within firms, unconditional basic income, to name only a few topics. As is indicated below many of the thematic panels I envision for the program are either firmly within economic sociology or intersect the preoccupations of economic sociology.

Sociology of Religion

The Sociology of Religion has a special relation to this theme, since at the heart of many religious traditions is a kind of utopian longing. This suggests many different ways in which the real utopia theme might resonate with the Sociology of Religion section: examining comparatively the efforts within many religious traditions to create utopian communities of various sorts – communities self-consciously constructed around religious principles of one sort or another (monasteries, intentional communities, etc.); the role of religious utopianism in secular social justice movements; the tensions between utopian ideals and practical compromises in religious movements. I am sure that there are many other issues that members of the sociology of religion section will think of that have not occurred to me. My hope is that there are people in the Sociology of Religion section who will creatively elaborate proposals around the problem of real utopias for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Disability and Society

I have particularly strong feelings about the core normative and practical issues addressed by sociologists within the Disability and Society section. My mother, Beatrice A. Wright, was a pioneer in Rehabilitation Psychology (she is the author of the book *Physical Disabilities: a psycho-social approach*) and throughout my childhood I was made aware of the importance of social and environmental forces in shaping the way any given disability or ability impacts the lives of people. She liked to say that being in a wheelchair is only a serious problem when there are no curb-cuts or ramps. Stairs, rather than not being able to walk, creates the disability of not being able to enter a building. I am thus especially eager to see serious discussions at the 2012 ASA that connect the theme of real utopias to the issue of disability and society. This would be an opportunity to bring together within a vigorous discussion the normative issues around social justice and disability rights with a sociological analysis of the institutions needed for people to live flourishing lives with different patterns of abilities and disabilities.

Labor and Labor Movements

There are many issues in the study of Labor and Labor Movements that connect with the Real Utopias Theme. Historically, after all, the labor movement in the broad sense has been one of the most central movements for envisioning alternatives to existing capitalist structures of power and inequality. Certainly issues of worker participation and empowerment within firms figures prominently in discussions of social emancipation. In my own work on real utopias, one of the issues I address is the idea of a “positive class compromise” (in contrast to “negative class compromise”) as a way of thinking about institutional configurations that simultaneously solve practical problems for capitalism while expanding the scope of working class power. This is close to what Andre Gorz called “nonreformist reforms” and is one way of thinking about strategies for creating the conditions for building alternatives. And, of course, there is the venerable discussion of union democracy – of the problem of building deeper forms of democratic life into the union movement itself. In these and many other ways (and ways I haven’t thought of), the labor movement is part of the agenda of real utopias. My hope is that there are people in the Labor and Labor Movements section who will be enthusiastic about the theme and creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Sociology of Emotions

I am sure that specialists in the sociology of emotions will think of many interesting ways that their field connects to the broad agenda of envisioning real utopias. For me the clearest connection concerns, on the one hand, the ways in which institutional structures can promote (or obstruct) positive emotions, and on the other, the role of positive emotions in helping to foster more egalitarian, democratic, and socially just social relations. There has been much fascinating work in recent years among psychologists and neuroscientists on positive emotions such as compassion. There is now much more understanding of the neurophysiology of compassion and how certain kinds of practices, such as mindfulness meditation, affect the brain and the capacity for compassion. I have not seen sociological work that directly engages the social conditions for promoting compassion, but I imagine that some exists. In any event, this is the kind of thing one might discuss in linking the sociology of emotions to real utopias. My hope is that there are people in the Sociology of Emotions section who will be enthusiastic about exploring such issues (and undoubtedly many that have not occurred to me!) and will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Race, Gender, and Class

The challenge to oppressions structured around race, gender and class is at the core of emancipatory social theory and thus central to the agenda of envisioning real utopias. Still, I think it is fair to say that most of the research and writing connected to the study of these forms of oppression and their intersection has focused on the diagnosis and critique of the existing social world rather than on the problem of the institutional design of emancipatory alternatives. Of course, it is always pretty easy to speak in vague and general terms about the vision for an ideal world. What is much more difficult is to think hard about the dilemmas, trade-offs, and contradictions in the social structures and institutions that would sustainably overcome oppression. This is the task of envisioning real utopias. My hope is that there are people in the Race, Gender and Class section who will engage this agenda and creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

History of Sociology

The most obvious way for the History of Sociology section to engage the theme of Real Utopias would be to explore the role of utopian thought in the development of sociology. There are a few explicit discussions of utopia, most notably perhaps in Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, but I think less explicitly utopian ideas – and anti-utopianism – have figured more broadly in some currents of sociology. Most obviously this would be in some currents of Marxist sociology, but I think modernization theory in sociology also had its utopian moments. In any case, these are some of the issues that could be addressed by the section (and I am sure that there are many others that I have not thought of).

Mathematical Sociology

The section on Mathematical Sociology would not seem, at first glance anyway, an especially promising site for discussions of real utopias. But I can imagine interesting efforts at formal models or computer simulations of various themes linked to possible social worlds and alternative systems. One of the issues in some discussions of real utopias is the problem of nonlinear dynamics and tipping points in creating cultural conditions for stability in constructing alternative institutions. There are also many game theory issues connected to real utopias and transitions that could be amenable to formal modeling. (In my own work on these themes, for example, I propose a concept of “symbiotic transformations” as one way in which real utopian alternatives can be constructed. One form of this is what I call “positive class compromises,” situations in which working class associational power has a positive effect on the interests of capital, and thus a compromise between labor and capital has the potential of opening up more social space for worker organizations. I model this as a strategic action problem involving intersecting, context-dependent games. Not being a mathematical sociologist, my elaboration of these problems is relatively informal, but this kind of problem could certainly be elaborated in a more formal way). My hope is that there are people in the Mathematical Sociology section who will find the challenge of thinking about mathematical models relevant to the theme of real utopias and creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Sociological Practice & Public Sociology

There is, I think, an intimate connection between some aspects of public sociology and the sociological study of real utopias. Both are anchored in normative commitments and normative reasoning. Both are concerned with linking rigorous research to the pivotal moral issues of our time, especially as these connect to questions of social justice. Both address audiences beyond the bounds of sociology as a discipline and the academy as an institution. And both are bound up with activism, with efforts to change the world and not merely interpret it. Because of these connections I would hope that the Sociological Practice & Public Sociology section would be especially interested in thinking about the problem of envisioning real utopias at the 2012 ASA meeting.

Political Economy of World-System

PEWS is one of the few sections in the ASA in which the idea of real utopias already has some serious intellectual standing, as reflected in Immanuel Wallerstein's 1998 book *Utopistics*. One idea for a possible panel at the meeting could be a retrospective on that book. PEWS is also the section in which issues around globalization and global justice have the greatest presence, and both of these raise critical questions about the design of alternative ways of organizing global institutions. Many people are skeptical that it is possible to build, even in principle (let alone in practice) a global system organized through institutions embodying emancipatory values. I imagine that there are people within the PEWS section who have given considerable thought to such matters.

Sociology of Population

The central idea of real utopias is to investigate alternatives to existing social structures and institutions that would promote human flourishing and social justice. Clearly demographic issues are among the most pressing in the world today and some of these are intimately linked to such issues. Much demographic research, for example, as shown that female literacy is associated with lower birth rates. There is also strong public support for parents in the form of paid parental leaves, good childcare services, etc. seems to increase fertility in highly developed countries. These kinds of connections between institutional transformations that thought to advance social justice and human flourishing and demographic problems are the sorts of issues that demographers might address in connection with real utopia theme.

Aging and the Life Course

The sociological concerns of the Aging and the Life Course section provide a really interesting context for thinking about real utopias. To give just one example, in recent years there has developed a variety of new kinds of “retirement communities” designed to facilitate what Robert L. Kahn has called “successful Aging”. With the impending retirement of the baby boom generation, these kinds of communities are likely to proliferate. One real utopia theme could revolve around an assessment of ways in which, on the one hand, the design of such communities may facilitate human flourishing, while on the other they may raise issues of social justice because of their tendency to be exclusionary (if only because of their cost). It would also be interesting to have a discussion about international variation in the way such communities are organized, for example on the implications of age-segregation vs inter-generational communities. In any case, this is just one kind of topic; I am sure there are many other issues in the sociology of aging and the life course that bear on the theme of envisioning real utopias.

Sociology of Mental Health

In a way the problem of real utopias, even if not under that rubric, has always figured in the Sociology of Mental Health. The central idea of “real utopias” is to think about alternative institutions that would promote human flourishing and social justice. One of the concerns in the sociology of mental health has been on the way mental illness is dealt with in society. This is reflected in the focus on stigma, repressive asylums, the dynamics of social acceptance and isolation, the conditions for dignity, and so on. There is also, of course, the enduring themes of anomie and alienation and the social conditions which generate different forms of psychic distress. The ASA theme is therefore a natural context for people active in the section to take stock on what we know and don’t know about the optimal design of institutions for dealing with these issues. My hope is that there are people in the Sociology of Mental Health section who will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Collective Behavior/Social Movements

Few sections in the ASA touch on the theme of envisioning real utopias more than Collective Behavior and Social Movements. After all, many social movements are animated by deep utopian yearning of one sort or another. Discussing about framing and other issues in contemporary social movement theory are, in part, all about conceptions of what is possible and what is not. The “real” in “real utopia” is precisely about the articulation of pragmatically possible transformations that are nevertheless infused with utopian visions for social justice and human flourishing. My hope is that there are people in the Collective Behavior and Social Movements section who will find it worthwhile to think systematically about the utopian moment with social movements and creatively elaborate proposals for panels that explore the connection between current research and theory of collective behavior/social movements and real utopias for the 2012 meeting.

International Migration

One of the politically hottest issues in the U.S. today revolves around international migration. If anything with globalization and uneven development, the question of how best to organize migration flows will become more intense in the future. The “real utopia” question about this issue, in a broad sense, concerns the design of regimes of international migration and how these connect to issues of social justice and human flourishing. This is partially a question of what might be the best politically achievable design, but more fundamentally the problem is elaborating what might be viewed as the optimal design of a *viable* migration regime (or the optimal design of institutions connected to the issue of international migration) even if it is not presently *achievable*. My hope is that there are people in the International Migration section who will creatively elaborate proposals for panels that might explore such issues at the 2012 meeting.

Sociology of Sexualities

The sociology of human sexualities poses really interesting issues for the problem of envisioning real utopias. Human sexuality is obviously deeply connected to the conditions for human flourishing, and thus linked to the normative concerns of the analysis of real utopias. At the core of the discussion of real utopias is the problem of “limits of possibility” – what kinds of social transformations in the direction of creating conditions for social justice and human flourishing are possible? In the last few decades the limits of social possibility around issues of sexuality have changed in ways that few people would have anticipated fifty years ago. I am not quite sure exactly what it would mean to explore these questions in terms of the transformation and design of institutions – which

has been my focus in talking about real utopias – but I imagine that many people in the human sexualities section will have interesting agendas.

Inequality, Poverty and Mobility (section-in-formation)

I know that the Inequality, Poverty and Mobility section is not yet officially a full ASA section, but clearly it will be so by the 2012 Annual Meeting. I think the preoccupations of this section have a distinctive relationship to the theme of that meeting, real utopias. On the one hand, at the very core of the idea of real utopias – the search for viable emancipatory alternatives to existing social structures and institutions – are issues of social justice bound up with poverty and inequality. Few sociological topics are more intimately connected to real utopia than poverty, inequality, and mobility. On the other hand, research associated with this section (and research associated with what used to be called “social stratification”) has generally bracketed questions about alternative possible worlds and the institutional conditions for realizing emancipatory normative ideals. Instead the focus has largely been on fine-grained empirical studies of the determinants of unequal life chances, the causes of being poor, and sometimes of the causes of poverty. One interesting issue, then, is how the body of sophisticated quantitative research on inequality poverty and mobility bears on the normatively-driven agenda of envisioning real utopias. My hope is that there are people in the Inequality, Poverty and Mobility section who will be interested in such questions, and any others involving the real utopias theme, and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Global & Transnational Sociology

The Global & Transnational Sociology section deals with some of the most challenging topics for sociology. Traditionally sociological research is carried out at most at the national scale (and most recent, in fact is anchored in more micro-levels of analysis). While there is a long tradition of comparative research, this is mostly cross-national – comparing national cases rather than engaging global processes as such. Only in the last few decades has the idea of a truly global level sociological analysis gained systematic traction. There is a host of issues connected to the theme of real utopias that need to be posed at this level of analysis: the problem of global governance, or even global democracy; global migration and the vision for open-borders; ecological crises and the conditions for their solution; global justice and global redistribution; and so on. My hope is that there are people in the Global & Transnational Sociology section interested in these kinds of questions (and others that have not occurred to me) and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis

I am not exactly sure how the central intellectual preoccupations of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis bear on theme of Real Utopias. The agenda of Real Utopias centers on the ways in which alternative designs of social structures and institutions can advance emancipatory goals of social justice and human flourishing. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis revolve around the fine-grained thick description of human interactions at the micro-level, especially those involving language. It is a challenge to think systematically about how these two kinds of agendas might be connected – how these rigorous, micro-level thick descriptions might inform the way we think about alternative possible worlds and the conditions for their realization. It certainly is the case that some conversational/linguistic styles of interaction might be thought of as more egalitarian – perhaps even more democratic – than others. At the heart of Habermas’s perspective on human emancipation, for example, is the idea of domination-free forms of deliberation and discussion, and this must involve distinctive forms of conversational interaction. I am not sufficiently familiar with conversation analysis and ethnomethodology to know if this kind of consideration plays an important role in this tradition of micro-sociology, but this is sort of issue which I see as potentially bearing on the theme of Real Utopias. My hope is that there are people in the Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis section who will find it worthwhile to explore such connections (and others which have not occurred to me) and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Human Rights

In a sense the very concept of “human rights” is an affirmation of the idea of real utopias. Declarations of human rights embody an aspiration for a world that does not exist, and efforts to build institutions to realize that aspiration always grapple with limits of possibility and the problem of transforming the limits themselves rather

than taking existing limits as unchangeable parameters. This is what the analysis of real utopias is all about. My hope is that there are people in the Human Rights section who will find it interesting and challenging to think about the problem of limits of possibility and their transformation for the realization of human rights and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels for the 2012 meeting.

Latino/a Sociology

The ASA section on Latino/a Sociology, I suspect more than any other ASA section, grapples with one of the most difficult contemporary political issues that also bears on envisioning real utopias: the problem of international immigration (especially “illegal” immigration) and the associated issue of multicultural and multi-lingual communities. My own understanding of social justice and the conditions for human flourishing is global, not national, and my values around issues of cultural diversity are pluralistic rather than exclusionary. Yet we live in a world where citizenship and the rights and powers connected to citizenship are organized on a national basis, and where strong solidarities tend to be formed around relatively narrow cultural identities. The real utopia question in such a world (given my values) is how to envision new institutions which are more closely aligned to these universalistic, egalitarian ideals. I don’t know the extent to which Latino/a Sociology has already focused on alternative institutional designs around immigration and cultural diversity, but in any case the Real Utopias theme for the 2012 ASA meetings provides an opportunity to explore such issues. My hope is that there are people in the Latino/a Sociology section who will be interested in engaging such issues (and others that I haven’t thought of) and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Rationality and Society

I think it is fair to say that most sociologists would assume that the preoccupations of the kind of sociology subsumed under the rubric “Rationality and Society” would have little bearing on the agenda of real utopias, or even be hostile to that agenda. This, I would argue, would be a serious mistake. My own work on real utopias has been deeply affected by a range of themes from game theory and rational choice analysis (see, for example: my analysis of class compromise; my approach to the problem of exploitation; my analysis of transition troughs in the context of ruptural transformations). The very idea of a “viable” alternative to existing institutions is that the institutional design would not generate self-destructive dynamics that would lead it unravel. This is basically a concept of an equilibrium in whatever game is embedded in the institution’s design. This is in line with Masahiko Aoki’s formulation of the problem of institutional equilibrium, which I think is basic to the analysis of real utopian possibilities. So, far from being antithetical to thinking about real utopias, I believe the intellectual armory of rational action and strategic interaction is one of the important tools for exploring alternatives. My hope is that there are people in the Rationality and Society section who will find it interesting to systematically think about these kinds of issues and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity

The core of the idea of real utopias is the search for viable alternatives to existing social structures and institutions that would create better conditions for human flourishing and advance the ideals of social justice. This is clearly a normatively-grounded agenda for sociological theory and research. As such, it clearly shares common ground with the concerns of the Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity section. On the one hand, the realization of “real utopias” requires solidarity and moral commitment on the part of social actors struggling to build new institutions. But also, one of the core objectives of creating real utopias is to foster deeper forms of solidarity and more altruistic forms of moral commitment.

Body and Embodiment

I am not really familiar with the intellectual agenda of scholarship linked to the Body and Embodiment section, and so it is difficult for me to reflect upon how the theme of real utopias might connect to the central concerns of people involved in the section. It is easy enough to see how some issues connected to the human body – health, physical disability, sexuality, gender, and violence, for example – bear on the problem of real utopias, but I am not sure if these are the sorts of issues explored within the Body and Embodiment Section. In any case, my hope is that there are people in the Body and Embodiment section who will be interested in the real utopia theme and creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco

The core of the idea of “real utopias” is the search for viable alternatives to existing social structures and institutions that would create better conditions for human flourishing and advance the ideals of social justice. I am not quite sure how this idea connects to the intellectual concerns of the Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco section of the ASA. It is certainly true that addiction in its various forms undermines human flourishing, and it may also be true that conditions of sharp social injustice contribute to addictions (although perhaps positing that association is a little simple minded). Critical theorists have at times argued that alienation and anomie in modern society contribute to various forms of escapism, and this might be connected to such things. These kinds of claims would also suggest that institutional transformations that promoted social justice and more egalitarian conditions for human flourishing might also transform the context in which people consume drugs and alcohol. This is one way in which the real utopias theme might connect to the agenda of the section. Another might be the question of the optimal social rules for regulating access to addictive and harmful substances and the optimal institutional structures for treating self-destructive addictions when they occur. In any event, my hope is that there are people in the Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco section who will find the theme interesting and will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Asia/Asian America

I am not exactly sure how the central intellectual preoccupations of scholars active in the Asia/Asian American section might best connect to the theme of Real Utopias. One set of issues might revolve around the general problem of multiculturalism and diversity within national boundaries in an increasing globalized world. What kinds of institutional structures within multicultural settings best promote egalitarian conditions for human flourishing? Another theme could center on global diasporas and their potential role in advancing – or perhaps hindering? – more globally-encompassing forms of social justice. I don’t know if either of these themes resonates with the research and writing of people in the Asia/Asian American section. In any case, my hope is that there are people who will be interested in thinking about the connection between the concerns of the Asia/Asian American section and the idea of real utopias and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels at the 2012 meeting.

Evolution, Biology and Sociology

The agenda of Real Utopias centers on the ways in which alternative designs of social structures and institutions can advance emancipatory goals of social justice and human flourishing. I am not exactly sure how the central intellectual preoccupations of scholars active in the Evolution, Biology and Sociology section might bear on this theme. One line of inquiry might track some of the recent developments in neuropsychology and “neuroeconomics” which have explored the association of neurological processes with things like altruism, moral reasoning, compassion, and cooperation, since all of these are clearly important for the realization of any real utopian transformations. It is not clear to me, however, whether there is much (yet) to say about the design of institutions in light of these findings. Another direction for exploring the connection between the agenda of real utopias and biology would revolve around gender issues. This is, needless to say, a sensitive issue. I personally believe that even if it is the case that biological processes help explain the historic patterns of gender inequality and the forms of domination structured around gender, biology has at most marginal relevance to the question of the limits of possibility for a more radically egalitarian and symmetrical structure of gender relations in the future. The prospects for full gender equality (or even for what some people term “genderlessness”) depend, I would argue, on the design of institutions rather than on any underlying sex-differentiated biological dispositions or capacities. This, of course, is a highly debatable proposition. My hope is that there are people in the Evolution, Biology and Sociology section who will be interested in exploring these kinds of issues (and others that I have not thought of) and that they will creatively elaborate proposals for panels connected to the theme of real utopias for the 2012 meeting.

Animals and Society

I do not really know much about the sociological research and writing connected with the intellectual agenda of the Animals and Society section of the ASA, and so I am not sure how the concerns of sociologists active in the section might connect with the Real Utopias theme. I therefore went to the section website and looked at the mission statement of the section, which states: “The purpose of the Section on Animals and Society is to encourage and support the development of theory, research and teaching about the complex relationships that

exist between humans and other animals. In the process, it is anticipated that the light we shed on these issues will increase the well-being of both humans and other animals.” The concern with increasing well-being is the core moral commitment of idea of real utopias, although I have to say that in my own formulation of these issues I have focused exclusively on the problem of well-being of people. The statement suggests that these two targets of well-being may move together. I wonder, however, if there might be any tension between these two moral concerns? It is always nice, in situations where there is a compound moral goal, for the full realization of one goal to simultaneously contribute to the realization of another. But often there are potential trade offs, whether between two values for the lives of people – say the promotion of material equality and the promotion of efficiency – or, as in the case at hand, between the realization of the wellbeing of people and of other animals. I don’t know if in fact there are such trade-offs, but it is one of the issues that one might explore in connection with the real utopia theme. Is their sociological research which bears on such questions? What is the real utopian institutional design for the welfare of animals? Are there ways in which such institutions might be inconsistent with the design of social institutions to promote social justice and the egalitarian conditions for human flourishing? These are the sorts of issues that might be worth exploring in the 2012 ASA meeting.

In general I got very positive, enthusiastic responses from people. At least no one who was annoyed by my letter wrote back to me. We will see how many sections include something connected to Real Utopias in the part of program which they directly organize, but even if they don’t, working through the sections this way Was good for me.

Program Committee Meeting, December, 2010

The first real meeting for the 2012 program was in Washington, D.C., in early December. During the fall the ASA office had been receiving proposals for sessions, many of them triggered by my section newsletter articles. They had perhaps fifty or so proposals. I also had been thinking about session, especially the real utopia proposal sessions, along with a dozen or so general thematic sessions. Other members of the committee also had suggestions. Kareem had assembled these into a loose leaf folder. Our task was to discuss all of these proposals – well over 100 – and decide which ones to keep. We then had to divvy responsibility for “shepherding” these thematic sessions among the committee members. We also had to go through the list of regular sessions that were normally scheduled for the 2012 ASA – these cycle through some kind of rotation – and decide whether the list was OK.

Members of the committee had lots of interesting suggestions. Our spirits were high as we built the program. I decided to be the shepherd for all of the proposal sessions since I really wanted these to be well constructed. Everyone else was happy to take on their share.

There weren’t any real tensions on the committee, but I did have a little trouble getting the full meaning of the “real utopias” idea across to everyone. A couple of the committee members didn’t really buy into the idea of a distinction between the idea of beneficial reforms and real utopia proposals and also to the idea of bracketing the idea of the political achievability of a transformation. One person in particular felt that the agenda should be much more firmly rooted in practical realities, indeed in the practical activities of activists and reformers on the ground. In the end I don’t think that the divergence will matter greatly for many topics, since the panels will be concerned with issues of social justice and making a better world. But I do

want to hone the contrast for theoretical reasons. It is interesting to me that it is hard to provide a completely transparent understanding of what is in play here.

EOB & Council Meetings January & February 2011

Starting at the end of December and continuing through February there were a number of quite dramatic events that intersected the ASA.

First, in December, the ASA had to decide whether or not to move the 2011 meetings from Chicago. Chicago is, of course, a prime setting for professional meetings, but it has special salience for Sociologists because American sociology really grew out of Chicago. The problem was that the conventional hotel with which we had a contract had an unresolved labor dispute, and since many ASA members will not cross picket lines, there was a real prospect that the summer meeting could be disrupted if the dispute continued until then. Because of this possibility, the ASA has a standard clause in its contracts that it can break a convention contract without penalty. It turned out that the Chicago Hilton was in a contract dispute with the hotel workers union. The ASA had to make a decision by the end of December, so there were a couple of conference calls among Council members and the decision was made to move the conference.

The next problem was figuring out where to move the meetings. It is not so easy to find a place for a 5000 person meeting with six months lead time. In the end the best option was Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. That was a pretty weird venue for the meeting, but there really wasn't an option.

The second dramatic event concerned a series of death threats received by Fran Piven, a previous president of the ASA. Fran is an outspoken progressive activist who had come under attack by Glen Beck on Fox News. He accused her of advocating violence to achieve her goals and described her as one of the most dangerous people in America. On his website's blog, some comments contained death threats to her. While not exactly endorsing these threats he refused to condemn them or delete them from the website. The ASA Council responded quickly with a strongly worded press release in defense of Piven against these attacks.

ASA Executive Office Board (EOB) – January 2010

I didn't know what to expect from this meeting. This is the first time I have been in an organizational meeting of this sort for any organization I have been connected to. The main issue we discussed were budgets and finances. This involved going over the budget of a multimillion dollar operation, discussing various issues connected to it, and reviewing the general finances of the ASA's portfolio. The latter was especially interesting. We had a few hour discussion with the financial advisor for the ASA who runs what is apparently an especially sensible financial investment managing company. He went over the philosophy of the company

and the performance indicators for our portfolio compared to various other indicators. Basically he said that it is more or less impossible in the long run to do well by trying to “pick stocks” and buying and selling frequently to gain on volatility. The thing to do is to decide on the broad mix of the portfolio and then have a strategy for rebalancing as one component or another increases in value and thus goes outside of the parameters of the balanced targets. In effect what this means is that if stocks begin to do very well, once this results in the value of the stocks in the portfolio increasing beyond some % threshold you shift out of stocks to rebalance the mix. This means you never stay in a type of asset when it begins to have any sort of bubbleish character. This seems to have worked well for the ASA – its finances are quite sound.

ASA Council meeting – February 2010

There were two especially interesting things at the meeting of Council (I have to keep reminding myself that it is not *the* Council, but just “Council”....)

The first was an extended, intense discussion of an *Amicus Brief* in support of sociological research presented in the sex discrimination civil suit against Wal-Mart. Bill Bielby, a former ASA President and sociology professor at UC Santa Barbara had testified at the original trial as an expert witness on behalf of the plaintiffs. His research was meant to show that there was a corporate culture at Wal-Mart that tacitly supported sex discrimination. The data was largely qualitative and consisted in showing how problems were framed and authority exercised within the corporation. At the trial Bielby’s work had been challenged by another sociologist, Chris Winship, for not being properly “scientific” and not demonstrating causation. Other testimony basically impugned the very possibility of a scientific sociology utilizing qualitative observation. So, the ASA was asked to submit an *Amicus Brief* in the matter.

Going into the discussion I thought this was a no brainer: how could anyone really object to the amicus brief? I had skimmed through it and it seemed fine. I was happy to let the lawyers worry about the details.

As it turned out, we had an extremely interesting and lively discussion. Several of the members of Council had read the document extremely carefully and found things which they objected to. Initially I thought this was nit-picking, but as we went through the details I changed my mind on this. The central issue was some ambiguity in the brief about whether we were defending the actual research Bielby had done – weighing in on the substantive merits of his scholarship – or simply defending the legitimacy of qualitative research as a current within sociology. In the end I agreed it was right that we avoid the issue of the specific research, so Council decided that the brief needed to be revised in specific ways. This was another case where the deeply deliberative character of council discussion was striking to me.

The other issue was a long standing debate in Council and the association over dues. While dues had been raised over time because of inflation, the level of dues in real terms had not changed in decades even though the range of activities of the Association had increased, and the structure of dues – the thresholds at which dues levels increased – had not changed as well. Over the past couple of years Council had discussed a variety of options and it was finely time make a choice. I argued strongly for a change in the structure of dues that would significantly increase the progressivity of dues. I ran some calculations to show that in fact even

with the change we still had a basically regressive structure – high earners paid a smaller % of their income in dues than low income members. We decided on the new dues structure with the steepest gradient with income and with more higher-income brackets. After the meeting I prepared a memo on this which got revised and included in the report in the ASA *Footnotes* on the issue:

Notes on the Explanation for the change in the ASA dues structure

The change in the dues structure proposed by Council is motivated primarily by concerns of fairness. There are two primary issues in play. First, the top bracket of the dues structure had been set in the mid 1990s at annual earnings of \$70,000 and above. Because of inflation and changes in pay structures, this meant that by 2010, 37% of regular ASA members were in the top bracket. Council felt it was important to raise the top bracket to \$150,000 and above and add four additional levels below this.

Second, Council felt that the dues gradient across these brackets needed to be made more progressive. It is, of course, a difficult and contentious issue precisely how to define “fairness” in a dues structure. This is similar to the more familiar problem of fairness in taxation. In the case of taxation, one broadly accepted principle of fairness is that everyone should experience the same *burden* of paying for the state. The central rationale for this equal burden principle is that since most taxes are used to pay for public goods which broadly benefit everyone in the society, all members of the society should experience the same sacrifice in paying for those goods. Since a given amount of money is more valuable to people with lower income, this equal burden principle underwrites the idea that the percentage of their income people pay in taxes should increase with income – that is, the rich should not simply pay *more* taxes than middle income and poor people, but should pay a higher proportion of their income in taxes. This is the principle of a progressive income tax structure. Two other kinds of tax systems violate this equal burden principle: a flat rate tax, in which everyone pays the same percentage of their income in taxes, and a poll tax, in which everyone pays the same absolute amount of taxes.

How do these considerations about taxation relate to the problem of the dues structure of the ASA? Much of what dues pay for is the public good of having a professional association that supports the profession of sociology as a whole in a wide number of ways, including: organizing key journals in the disciplines; gathering and disseminating data on sociologists and academic departments; providing timely information of the job market for sociologists; promoting public dissemination of sociological research; facilitating the building of strong networks among sociologists in all of the different settings in which sociologists work; organizing the annual meeting of the profession (which is a public good even for those sociologists who do not attend in any given year); and having a highly capable staff capable of responding quickly to public issues affecting sociology. These are real public goods for the community of sociologists, and thus the equal burden principle is relevant for deciding how much members of the association should contribute to providing these public goods. This is why a progressive dues structure, in which higher income members pay more than lower income members, is justified.

The change in the dues structure proposed by Council makes the structure more progressive in three ways. First, it creates a new category, unemployed, for which dues have been lowered below the current lowest level (from \$71 to \$50). Second, it raises the dues levels of the previous income brackets below the top bracket by a very modest amount (\$9 to \$16 a year). And finally, in the five new income brackets, dues are increased more substantially, by \$26 to \$116 a year. The result is a significantly more progressive dues structure than existed in the past. (However, it must be noted that even if the proposed new dues structure is a move in the *direction* of progressivity, it *actually remains regressive*: The higher income brackets pay a lower percentage of their income in dues to the Association than do the lower income brackets. If the dues structure were based even on a flat-tax principle set at the rate proposed for people earning \$30,000/year, then the dues of ASA members earning \$150,000 would be \$625/year rather than \$350. A truly progressive dues structure would require even higher dues than this at the top level. While Council felt it was important to make the dues structure more progressive, it felt that it was not realistic to create a fully progressive dues structure that embodied the equal burden principle).

When this got published in *Footnotes* in preparation for the referendum vote among ASA members over the dues increase, there was a pretty intense and rancorous blogosphere attack on the proposal. A number of sociology blogs sounded pretty much like the Tea Party, attacking the ASA for wasting resources, for simply wanting to increase salaries of a bloated ASA bureaucracy, of engaging in all sorts of unnecessary and undesirable programs. The arguments I had made for increased progressivity were attacked as a dishonest cover for raising aggregate dues and of being patronizing by raising such elementary issues. Council and the Executive Office were accused of hiding data. Demands were made for transparency, including making available the ASA tax returns and other things. It turns out that these were always available on line on the ASA website, but this didn't really matter for the attackers. This then triggered a petition signed by dozens of sociologists, including quite a few pretty prominent scholars, demanding clarifications and fuller explanations for the dues increase. I was quite taken aback by the aggressiveness of the attacks and the quickness with which morally charged accusations were levied. I wonder if this is an effect of the attention-mongering culture of the blogosphere, or a spill-over effect of the tone and style of the Tea Party movement. In any case it was quite unpleasant.

The ASA secretary, Kate Berheide, handled this all with great calm and care. She started a column in *Footnotes* where she systematically replied, without aggravation, to the issues raised. This did, in the end, cool things off and the proposal to raise dues passed easily 56% to 29%.

Meantime, back in Wisconsin....

February and March were an extraordinary time in Madison. Wisconsin was in the midst of massive protests against the Governor. This added enormous intensity to this period: flying off to meetings, returning to demonstrations and the occupation of the state capitol.



Program committee meeting in Denver March 2011

The Program Committee met in Denver in early March to finalize the heart of the program, check out the convention center and hotel meeting site, assign tasks for shepherding sessions to final state, and discuss any other things about the meeting. The meeting was a great success. The site is really terrific – a lovely downtown area with a pedestrian mall and lots of small, appealing shops and restaurant. The main conference hotel is a pleasant, if pretty standard convention hotel, located across the state from a very nice convention center with an enormous blue bear statue outside peering in. The program committee was focused and resolved nearly all of the important issues. The basic tasks included:



- Deciding which proposals for sessions from members should be accepted or rejected. Most of these were suggestions for the thematic part of the program, but a few were for special sessions of one sort or another.
- Assigning a member of the committee to be a shepherd for each invited paper panel. This means either directly organizing the invitations or recruiting an organizer for the session.
- Getting agreement on my proposal for the plenary sessions and plenary speakers. There will be three – one on Equality, one on Democracy and one on Sustainability.
- Deciding on the specific menu of “regular session” – these are the paper submission sessions – and then coming up with lists of names of people to try to recruit to be the organizer of the session itself. There will be several hundred of these – sometimes more than one session for a given topic – so that was a big task.

The program will be fantastic. I am really delighted with how everything went.



The last evening we went to a famous restaurant in a one-time fort and trading post in the hills overlooking Denver, billed as a restaurant serving Western game, Bison, and other such dishes. Outside in the courtyard they had some relics of the Old West...

The meeting lasted two and a half days. I was exhausted by the time things ended on Sunday afternoon when I flew to Dallas to visit my brother Woody. Since the end of January I have been taking a Mindfulness Meditation course at the University and

keeping a meditation journal. After the meeting I had a really interesting experience connected to my emerging meditation practice. Here are some notes I wrote about this at the time (in a meditation journal I was writing for the class):

Sunday evening, March 6

Much to write about.

My meeting ended at 2pm. I went to the Denver airport with colleagues, hung out with one, Rhonda Levine, for an hour, and then went to the gate for the flight to Dallas. When I got onto the plane I decided to use the flight to try to push beyond the limits of my previous meditation practice. I was tired – not sleepy, but fatigued and certainly low energy – and didn't think I would get any work done anyway. Normally in a situation like this – with an hour and a half flight after an intense couple of days – I would sleep. But instead, I decided to meditate. I set my goal to begin right away, while people were still boarding and then not stop until we touched down in Dallas. The person in the adjoining seat was already in place, so I made myself comfortable, took out my iPod and started the stopwatch – curious about how long I could do this – and began.

One hour and forty four minutes later (or, to be precise: 1:44:26.9 later....) we touched down and I opened my eyes. I know that I had not slept or drifted off – I was aware of the entire trip and the various phases of the flight. I really had meditated the entire time. For the first half hour or so I did sitting meditation of the sort I had done the previous couple of days. Then I did a full body scan in a very detailed way. And after that, I went back to simple sitting meditation until we landed.

None of that captures, really, what this was like for me. Needless to say, never in my entire life have I sat basically motionless for one hour and 44 minutes. I followed the practice of the previous three days: not moving at all, sitting erect, feet on the ground, legs not crossed, hands at my sides. Normally I always sit with my legs crossed, and when I fly I always put the seat in the reclining position and find the upright position rather uncomfortable. But on this flight I didn't cross my legs once and I kept the seat in the upright position the entire time. When an itch or pain or discomfort occurred, I did exactly what John Kabat-Zinn had instructed on the CD – turn my attention to the itch, focus on it, breath through it (or something like that) and let it dissolve. In 1h44min there were a lot of itches, tingles, aches, tightnesses, pressure points. My lower back began to ache; I dissolved it. My neck was getting tired supporting my head. No problem. At one point I had an intense itch inside of my ear – I have been having itchy ears this winter for some reason – and also on my chin. Both at the same time. Definitely more of a challenge, but I first went to my chin and then the ear. I even managed to more or less dissolve bladder pressure.

There were really only two occasions when I moved my body. About a half hour before we landed I coughed, and I raised my hand to cover my mouth. And maybe ten minutes later both of my forearms began to hurt because of pressure points from the armrests and I could really eliminate the discomfort, so I moved my arms a few inches.

I know – or at least assume – that refusing to move at all to relieve discomfort is way more rigid than needed. Meditation practice probably doesn't really need that degree of stillness. But it was really interesting doing it this way.

Oh yes -- there was one other way I deviated from complete stillness: I licked my lips periodically from dryness. The dryness was exacerbated a bit because I had eaten a couple of crackers just before I sat down, and the cracker residue was in my mouth. I tried not to swish my tongue around the inside of my mouth to remove that, but my lips got quite dried out so on a couple of occasions I licked them.

Other observations:

From time to time I became very acutely aware of sounds. The meditation became, in a way, also a tour of the soundscape of plane ride, the sounds sometimes brought into quite heightened relief: the sound of the door being latched (I was near the front); the announcements at the beginning; the bing-bong signal that it was OK to undo seat belts; the sound of trays clattering open when the service cart came with drinks; the chorus of spritzes as soda cans were opened (that was especially dramatic – there must have been five or six spritz, sprtz,

spritz in a row); someone taking something out of a paper bag that made an incredibly loud crinkle sound. And then there were the noises of the plane itself – the constant woosh of the engines, but then the subtle changes in sound as the plane began to decelerate.

When we began the decent I decided to see if I could sense the change in sound and speed sufficiently well that I could know just when we were going to land. When I say “decided” I don’t mean that I had an elaborate conversation with myself – I just oriented my attention to the sounds and the angle of the plane as it changed with that intention. I kept my steady breathing, and kept pretty much tracking the in-breaths and out-breaths for their full lengths, but also focusing on the sounds. I can’t quite describe the double focus, because it is neither switching back and forth between breathing and listening, nor exactly doing both at the same time with equal weight, and saying something like “breathing the sound” doesn’t make any sense. But regardless of the linguistic difficulty in describing this, I didn’t really ever leave fully the breathing but I was intensively focused on sound. And just before we touched down, just a breath before, I thought: we’re down.

At one point in the flight the plane banked and the sun came through the window right onto my eyelids. My field of shut-eyed vision was flooded with golden glow, intensely beautiful and warm. I almost felt I was breathing in the light.

Only once was I jostled while sitting in the seat. The person next to me in the window seat shifted in his seat and his elbow bumped into my arm – not painfully, but sharply, pushing me a bit. I had a powerful instant image of being a clapper in a bell, swinging back and forth, and almost a sense of an electric shock – no, not that, but a kind of jolt of physical sensation – pulsing through my body for an instant.

Throughout all of this there were, of course, many moments of brain chatter, of drifting thoughts. Sometimes these would go on for more than a few seconds, almost little mini-episodes of thoughts before my awareness would bring me back. Mostly these did not stick in my memory, but one was about the Afghan war and its length, I think triggered by an initial thought of being in an airplane connecting to 9/11. There were also thoughts about what I might write about this. I try to avoid that – to have the fact that I am going to write up notes figure at all in the process of meditating. I don’t want to be “planning” what would be interesting to write down, but whiffs of that do happen from time to time. I know that when the sun flooded my eyelids I thought that would be a nice thing to write about, and when I was jostled and had the bell clapper image I also thought about writing it down later.

When we touched down I opened my eyes. Not slowly, but abruptly. Somehow that felt like the way to go this time – to leap from one state to another. I was struck by the vivid, sharp intensity of my surroundings. I felt what I can only describe as being hyper-awake: not agitated at all, but totally awake and totally rested and energetic even though I hadn’t slept at all. It is now 11pm and I have been in this elevated state pretty much constantly since 6:30 when I arrived. When I met my brother at the airport I felt I was talking a mile a minute. I told him that I didn’t really feel hyper-active, just hyper-lively. He assured me that I was not being weird.

So, what to make of all this? There have been many interesting moments so far in the meditation practices I have done in connection with the mindfulness class, but this is the first time that what happened was something pretty much completely outside of anything I have ever experienced. I don’t know how easy this will be to do on a regular basis. How long a meditation is needed to have this effect? It is maybe easier to do this on a plane when there really isn’t anything else pressing to do. I don’t know if I can regularly meditate for an hour, and certainly not approaching two hours. But before today I wouldn’t have thought I could do it at all.

Other ASA-connected events in the Spring-Summer, 2011

I didn't really keep this journal up-to-date as an on-going journal in this period, so what follows is just a brief recollection of some salient events in the spring and summer of 2011.

April: visit to the Wikimedia Foundation

On a trip to California to give some talks and participate in a symposium in the Sociology Department at Berkeley, I also visited the Wikimedia Foundation in San Francisco. The visit grew out of a discussion I had with Annie Lin, a graduate of the Berkeley sociology program who is currently working at the Foundation as one of the coordinators of their education initiative. I met with Annie to discuss my idea of an ASA Wikipedia project along the lines of the way the Association of Psychological Sciences has a project to encourage psychologists to contribute to Wikipedia. Annie organized a visit for me to the Foundation during which I also gave a walk on Wikipedia as a Real Utopia.

I had a fantastic time spending the day in the Wikimedia Foundation. They occupy a pleasant building in downtown San Francisco. About 60 people, I was told, work there. Most are young and nearly all have the appealing quality of being dedicated, enthusiastic, and somewhat geeky. They all see Wikimedia as important, as a revolutionary force in the digital age. With pride a number of people pointed out that Wikipedia was the only nonprofit website without commercials among the top-10 sites in the world.



I also sensed among some of the longer-standing staff people in the Wikimedia Foundation a certain nostalgia for an earlier period in the history of Wikipedia and a certain apprehension of what lay ahead. Wikipedia is only a decade old, so it obviously reflects the speed of development and change in the digital world that it is even possible to be nostalgic about a "bygone era", but there were certainly people I met with who looked fondly at an earlier time when working at the Foundation was not part of any sort of career, but simply an exciting, adventurous thing to do. Now it is becoming a kind stepping stone to jobs in the more commercial internet world. This was felt as a loss as Wikipedia was run less by a rag-tag band of stalwarts with a mission and more by a collection of interesting, if still generally earnest, people working at a Foundation for now, but with plans that this will help their longer term careers. A

Apprehension about the future was also raised by many people. Wikipedia had grown incredibly – over 4 million entries now in English, and well over 150 other languages with some kind of Wikipedia. But the rate of new entries was declining, and of even greater concern, the

number of new editors was declining. There was concern expressed that some long-established editors were being unwelcoming to new editors, treating them in a hostile way when conflicts over editing occurred, and in other ways discouraging their participation. This concern about the future is one of the reasons that the staff at the Foundation were involved in trying more proactively to draw people into the Wikipedia editing world, especially through the new projects engaging higher education.

At lunchtime I gave a talk on Wikipedia as a Real Utopia. I began more or less by asking a question:

If someone were to ask you “what is Wikipedia an example of? What other things would you group it with?” what would you say? Here are some different possible answers: A typical consumer of digital information might say, “Wikipedia goes with Google, Amazon, eBay, YouTube, Facebook – all of those cool, innovative internet sites.” A more sophisticated software person might say, “Wikipedia goes with Linux, Apache, and other open-source software projects, and maybe things like the Creative Commons.” I would give a very different kind of answer: “Wikipedia goes with participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; solidarity finance in Quebec; Mondragon, the worker-owned industrial cooperative in Spain; and community land trusts used to support urban agriculture.

I then explained the general idea of real utopias as a way of elaborating on the notion that “another world is possible.” Wikipedia is like worker cooperatives and community land trusts because they are all fundamentally anti-capitalists ways of people coming together to cooperate to produce things to satisfy human needs. I could tell that this was not a familiar way of understanding Wikipedia. I continued: “There is an irony here. Jimmy Wales (Wikipedia’s founder) says that he is a devotee of Ayn Rand, and yet Wikipedia is profoundly anticapitalist: it relies entirely on unpaid editors; it is free to anyone in the world; the financial basis comes from voluntary donations based on a commitment to the public good; conflict resolution is increasingly organized through a democratic-participatory process; and so on.

The rest of the time at the Foundation was spent informally chatting with different groups of programmers and others engaged in Wikimedia projects. I got quite a bit more information about the education initiative and discussed how the ASA could participate. This definitely seems like something the ASA should do with energy: build an ASA portal to Wikipedia that will make it easy for professors to organize Wikipedia writing projects in their classes and also make it easy for sociologists in general to contribute to Wikipedia articles.

May: lecturing at Rosa Luxembourg Center, Berlin

In mid-May I went to Berlin for ten days to give a series of lectures on Real Utopias and also to see if there was interest in some people from the Institute participating in the 2012 ASA conference. Detailed notes on that trip are in a separate journal.

The David Brooks flap

In early summer there was a flurry of angry emails over the decision by the ASA Awards committee to give David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, an award for the public

understanding of sociology. This award is given each year to a nonsociologist – typically, but not always, a journalist -- who uses sociology in one way to increase public understanding of social issues. The committee relies on nominations from ASA members and apparently, this year, the committee's judgment was that David Brooks was the most deserving person nominated.

When news of this got out, quite a few ASA members were really angry, and expressed this through emails widely circulated in protest to the decision. The main issue was that Brooks was seen as not simply a political Conservative, but as someone who used sociological research in highly selective and manipulative ways (and sometimes outright distorted ways) to buttress right-wing positions. The complaint was that he was sloppy and (probably) dishonest, not just that he supported positions to which people objected. As in the earlier email storm around the proposed ASA dues increase, the tone of many of these emails was angry and accusatory, with particular animosity directed at the committee that had made the decision. I felt quite ambivalent about the whole business. On the one hand, I certainly share the general dislike of David Brooks use of sociology, although from time to time he writes what I think is an insightful piece; on the other, there are certainly many sociologists who find Brooks interesting (often in spite of his politics), and I feel that ASA committee ought to be given the benefit of the doubt and left alone to do their work. What I suspect is that the committee didn't get many nominations and did their best in good faith. In any case these awards are almost always given to progressive scholars, so it isn't such a bad thing for the ASA to give it to a conservative.

The emails died down after a few weeks, but I think left some pretty bruised feelings among some people on the awards committee.

Wikimedia Education Summit

In mid-July I attended a three day "Education Summit" in Boston organized by the Wikimedia Foundation. The idea was to bring together university educators from around the country to discuss the Foundations effort to get academics more involved in writing and editing Wikipedia articles. The basic initiative to accomplish this was to make it easy for professors to give Wikipedia writing assignments to students as part of normal course work. The Foundation has done several things to facilitate this. In addition to a pretty user-friendly set of web-based materials to help professors do this, the key facilitation is the creation of a system of Wikipedia campus ambassadors. These are generally experienced Wikipedians who are recruited to help teach Wikipedia editing and norms to students in classes in which there are Wikipedia writing assignments. These ambassadors come to classes to give presentations and provide tutorial and help-line services to students. All of this is based on the Wikipedia model of voluntary contributions to enhancing a community. At the conference there were presentations by ambassadors, professors and students who had been involved in the first year experiment.

Even before the summit, I was sold on the idea of using Wikipedia in the classroom. This seems like a fantastic way getting more people involved in improving Wikipedia. But what also became clear from the Summit is that it was a very powerful course assignment, enabling students to have a different relationship to the problem of knowledge consumption and production. I had already made plans for an ASA Wikipedia initiative along these lines before the Summit, but became much more committed to the project after the meeting in Boston. I

also decided that it would be a good thing for me to do such an assignment in my graduate seminar on *Theories of the state* this fall. Since normal term papers in seminars are quite different from Wikiarticles – since Wikipedia articles are supposed to adopt an NPOV (neutral point of view) and provide purely factual/descriptive information – the idea would be for students to write Wikipedia entries (or modify existing ones) as a spin-off from writing their term papers. We'll see what happens.

At the Summit I made contact with a group of computer scientists at Carnegie Mellon University who had been closely involved with setting up the web portal for the Association of Psychological Sciences to facilitate their Wikipedia project and with a recent PhD in Sociology from the University of Pittsburgh, Piotr Konieczny, who did his dissertation on Wikipedia. They agreed, eagerly, to be involved in the ASA initiative, which will clearly make the whole thing go smoother.

Executive Office Board Meeting, July

The EOB meets twice a year. The July meeting was a very relaxed event, and to everyone's pleasure, finished in one day.

The afternoon before the meeting I went to the ASA Headquarters to meet different people and to begin the serious discussion of the Wikipedia project. I was really impressed by the operation and the seriousness of the people in different offices. The young woman who was the webmaster for the association was very enthusiastic about the Wikipedia project. She was clearly someone deeply embedded in Internet culture and had a reverential feeling about Wikipedia as an epicenter of internet free-wheeling participation. She expressed a lot of excitement, and pleasure, at being involved in this.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the EOB meeting was an extended discussion of the "transparency" issues that had surfaced during the controversy over the dues increase. It is difficult to know how salient this issue really is in the association as a whole, but certainly on some of the prominent sociology-oriented blogs there has been a lot of discussion about transparency and need for "sunshine rules". In response to the dues controversies, Kate Berheid has introduced a more regular column in *Footnotes* about budgets and expenses, but another issue that has come up concerns the transparency of the budgets for journals. This reflects two sorts of issues. Some ASA members seem to feel that journals, the job-bank and the Annual Meeting are really the only legitimate functions for the ASA. Some have suggested that we move the ASA office to a cheap city – Omaha has been suggested – and reduce our functions to this minimum. The other issue is that we may not be supporting journals adequately and that the membership should be able to scrutinize the journal budgets.

I commented that until I had become involved in the ASA as an organization after being elected President I had been really clueless about what the ASA did. I had no idea of the many activities in which it engaged and the importance of its various policy and research initiatives. One thing to think about, then, was how to get this information out to people. Of course, making the information available is not the same thing as anyone paying attention to it.

In terms of the budgets for different ASA journals, this is a really tricky issue given the nature of those budgets. It would be quite misleading to make these transparent for all sorts of reasons. This is something that the PubsCom will have to deal with.

In the evening Kate Berheide and I went to the Arena Theater to see their celebrated production of *Oklahoma!* Bob and Tess Hauser joined us. It was completely delightful. One of the perks of going to Washington regularly to ASA meetings is being able to take in shows at the Arena theater.