

**An open letter to ASA sections about the Real Utopias theme  
of the 2012 ASA annual meeting**

**Erik Olin Wright  
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The theme for the 2012 Annual meeting of the ASA is “Real Utopias: Emancipatory projects, institutional designs, possible futures.” Here is how I described the core idea of this theme in the ASA newsletter, *Footnotes*:

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

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

I am hoping that many of the sections of the American Sociological Association will be enthusiastic about engaging this theme in some of the sessions which they directly organize, but I also hope that members of different ASA sections will submit proposals to the program committee for thematic panels which explore the problem of real utopias within their subfield. To facilitate such proposals I thought it might be helpful if I shared some of my general ideas on the structure of the thematic and plenary panels for the 2012 meetings. This is all quite tentative – the first real meeting of the program committee where these and other ideas will be discussed will be in early December – but it may give people some idea of the kinds of things I hope to see happen. What follows, then, is a brief sketch of the different kinds of panels around the theme of Real Utopias I would like see at the meeting.

### **I. Real Utopia Proposals Sessions**

Each of these sessions will revolve around a proposal for a real utopian design to resolve some domain of problems. Examples would include: unconditional basic income, market socialism, equality-sustaining parental leaves, participatory budgets, random-selection democratic assemblies, worker cooperatives, stakeholder corporations, solidarity finance, democratic media, etc. The ideal here is to recruit an anchor person for the session who we know has already worked extensively on formulating such real utopia designs rather than simply a person who has thought critically about the theme (although there will certainly be flexibility on this). This format

will not be appropriate for all of the themes around real utopias; it will be especially effective for those problems around which there exists an on-going discussion of alternative institutions.

My idea is for the sessions to be organized as follows:

- We will create a dedicated website for these sessions.
- The person who anchors these sessions will prepare an elaborated proposal for institutional designs around some theme which will be posted online by early 2012. While of course these essays will include some discussion of what's wrong with existing structures and institutions, the goal is for them to sketch the central contours of alternatives. By this I do not mean a detailed "institutional blueprint", but rather a careful elaboration of the core principles of an institutional proposal. My expectation is that these will be in the 10,000 word range, although some could be longer.
- In some sessions there could be two competing or contrasting proposals. Having two different proposals could make for a very lively session for some topics.
- The website will allow for comments and dialogue so that these proposals can be part of a discussion prior to the meeting. I am not sure yet precisely what the best design for the website would be, but I am hopeful that it will be an interactive site rather than simply a passive site.
- At the session there will be a very brief – 15-20 minute – presentation of the proposal and at most one commentary, or perhaps a contrasting proposal. I want to avoid panels with lots of presentations and little time for debate and discussion.
- In *Footnotes*, section newsletters, and other modes of information dissemination we will encourage people to look at the proposals before the meeting and to come to sessions with issues they want to raise. While of course we want to avoid long-winded speeches from the floor, I think somewhat longer than usual interventions could be constructive.

#### *Partial list of potential Topics for Proposal Sessions*

Below is an initial list of thematic panels built around real utopia proposals. I have identified these sessions by the central principle of the proposal (for example, Unconditional Basic Income) rather than by the general topic or target of a proposal (eg. Healthcare), except where I do not have a specific real utopian proposal in mind. Because of my own expertise, most of the topics I have thought of revolve around political and economic issues. Nevertheless, it would be good if some of these thematic proposal sessions revolved around cultural issues of various sorts and around egalitarian and social justice issues that are not exclusively socio-economic in character (gender, race, sexuality, etc.). Some of these topics may be more suitable for general thematic sessions rather than for the proposal sessions.

1. Unconditional Basic Income
2. A democratic media system
3. "High road" capitalism
4. Democratizing finance
5. Participatory budgeting
6. A democratic, egalitarian system of campaign finance
7. Deliberative referenda

8. Gender: Parental leaves for gender equality
9. Parecon (participatory economics)
10. A framework for a digital network economy
11. Building the Scientific Commons (publications, data dissemination, etc.)
12. Community policing
13. Worker-owned Cooperatives
14. Pensions, labor's capital, solidarity finance, wage earner funds
15. Randomocracy, citizens assemblies
16. LETS (local exchange trading systems)
17. Globally just Fair trade
18. Market socialism
19. Intellectual property – the creative commons
20. Public education
21. Universities
22. Healthcare

## II. Film/documentary sessions

I think it would be very interesting to have a number of sessions which present documentary films on exemplary and iconic cases of social innovations to solve problems. The intention here is not to have cheerleading films, but documentaries that analyze specific kinds of leading cases. The films could either be presented by the filmmaker or by an expert who researches the case and could lead a discussion following the film. Most documentaries which are thematically relevant on these issues tend to be mainly about social movements and struggles – sometimes of the “heroic struggle” variety – and not so much about outcomes, institutional innovations, actual transformations of social structures. So, I am not sure exactly what is available.

Examples could include things like:

- The *kibbutz* – there are a number of films that are retrospectives on the kibbutz experience
- *Holding Ground*  – a film about the Dudley Street neighborhood association
- Public transportation – I understand that there is an interesting film about innovative public transportation in Brazil, but I have not seen it
- Local food, alternative agriculture

## III. Thematic panels around broad topics and disciplinary subfields

Some of the topics listed under Real Utopia Proposals sessions could be shifted to these regular thematic sessions if we don't find a suitable anchor person with a well-worked out institutional/transformational proposal. And some of the topics listed below, of course, could also be moved to the institutional proposal category.

In terms of format, I have a strong preference for sessions which do not have so many

presentations that there is no time for discussion, and generally I prefer sessions without discussants – my experience is that it is usually more interesting to have discussion from the floor unless the discussant is really engaged in a debate with a specific argument (as in the proposal sessions). For these sessions, then, I would generally like three presenters and no discussant.

*Some possible topics for general thematic sessions*

1. Consumerism
2. The corporation: alternative models for more democratic/participatory governance
3. Carework
4. Future studies as a framework for envisioning real utopias
5. The Cleveland cooperatives initiatives
6. Mondragon, Emilia-Romagna and other exemplary worker cooperative districts
7. Utopian thinking within sociological theory
8. Utopian and dystopian visions
9. Marxism and real utopias or Marxism vs real utopias
10. Energy
11. Global Warming
12. The family
13. Sexuality
14. Childhood/children
15. Cities
16. Multiculturalism
17. Linguistic justice
18. Race, racial justice
19. International migration
20. Methodological issues: nonevents and possible futures
21. Criminal justice: crime & punishment
22. The military
23. Intentional communities
24. 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian communities
25. Transforming culture
26. Local food
27. Alternative Agro-food Systems
28. The Internet
29. Wikipedia
30. Creative commons
31. Voluntary simplicity
32. The Chicago participatory budget experiment
33. Transhumanism
34. Science policy

#### IV. Plenary Panels

The program contains up to three plenary sessions – one on Friday evening and the in the noon slot on Saturday and Sunday. Tentatively, I am thinking of the following possibilities:

1. *Big Ideas for Real Utopias*: This could be one or two of the plenary panels, depending on other plenary suggestions. The idea would be to have a panel(s) featuring very prominent, articulate advocates of specific real utopian proposals. I envision three presentations for this panel, each around some Big Idea. One idea is also for these panelists to lead a proposal-thematic session (category I above) on the day after they are on the plenary panel. This would make it possible for there to be intensive discussion of the high profile ideas presented in the plenaries.

If we have only one plenary session of this character, the topics could include, for example, some of the following:

- Basic Income
- A democratic media system
- Participatory Budgets and direct democracy
- Gender Equality and the family
- Cooperatives

If we have two panels of this sort, one could be built around democracy issues and one around equality issues:

Democracy:

- Making Elections truly democratic
- Participatory budget and direct democracy
- Democratic media

Equality

- Basic income
- Gender equality and family
- Cooperatives

2. *Energy, the environment, and global warming*: This plenary would focus on institutional designs for countering global warming and other aspects of ecological crisis rather than just the nature of the problem itself. Mostly when I have seen panels and discussions of these issues the discussion of institutional design is pretty thin. There is a sharp indictment of existing consumption and production patterns and a call for dramatic transformation in how we do things, but little discussion of the mechanisms for accomplishing this and how sustainability and low growth can be institutionalized and reproduced.

3. *Sociology as Real Utopia*: I am less sure about this, but it might be possible to have a session which reflected on the nature of the discipline and academic life, and asked what the real utopia vision for sociology might be.