

## Sketch of ideas for thematic and plenary sessions for the 2012 ASA annual meeting

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Below I have outlined a variety of different kinds of panels I would like to see organized around the theme of Real Utopias for the 2012 ASA meetings. In some cases I have indicated possible people who might be either the organizer of the panel or the key speaker on the panel, and in a few instances I already know for sure that they are willing to do so. I do not mean these suggestions to in any way pre-empt ideas from the rest of the program committee or define hard constraints on the development of the program. These are just my initial ideas.

### 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, but I certainly would be willing to be flexible on this. This format will not be appropriate for all of the themes around real utopias, but really only for those problems around which there is 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. 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.
- 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 and whether this is something that should be done by the ASA itself or something which I should organize independently.
- 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 topics and in some cases possible authors of the core proposal. (An asterisk indicates that I know for sure the person is willing to do this). These sessions are identified by the central principle of the proposal (eg Unconditional Basic Income) rather than by the topic or target of a proposal (eg. Healthcare), except where I do not have a specific real utopian proposal in mind. Most of the topics I have thought of revolve around political and economic issues. I suppose these are the ones most amenable to institutional design proposals. 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, etc.). Some of these topics may be more suitable for general thematic sessions rather than for the proposal sessions.

1. Unconditional Basic Income – Phillipe van Parijs (University of Louvain-le-Neuve, Belgium)\*
2. A democratic media system – Bob McChesney (University of Illinois)\*
3. High road capitalism – Joel Rogers\*
4. Democratizing finance – Fred Block (University of California-Davis)\*
5. Participatory budgeting – Gianpaolo Baiocchi (Brown)
6. A democratic, egalitarian system of campaign finance – Bruce Ackerman (Yale Law School)
7. Deliberative referenda – John Gastil (University of Washington)
8. Gender: Parental leaves for gender equality – Janet Gornick (CUNY)
9. Parecon (participatory economics) – Michael Albert (Z-Magazine)
10. A framework for a digital network economy– Yochai Benkler (Harvard Law)
11. Community policing – Archon Fung
12. Worker-owned Cooperatives
13. Pensions, labor’s capital, solidarity finance, wage earner funds
14. Randomocracy, citizens assemblies
15. LETS (local exchange trading systems)
16. Globally just Fair trade
17. Market socialism
18. Intellectual property – the creative commons
19. Public education
20. Universities
21. Heathcare

## 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 – Juliet Schor (Boston College)\*
2. The corporation: alternative models for more democratic/participatory governance – Gerald Davis (Michigan)\*
3. Carework – Nancy Folbre (UMass Amherst) and the Russell Sage working group\*
4. Future studies as a framework for envisioning real utopias – Wendell Bell (emeritus, Yale University)
5. The Cleveland cooperatives initiatives – Gar Alperowitz
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 – Philippe van Parijs
- A democratic media system – Bob McChesney
- Participatory Budgets and direct democracy – Gianpaolo Baiocchi
- Gender Equality and the family – Janet Gornick
- Cooperatives – Gar Alperowitz

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

Democracy:

- Elections – Bruce Ackerman
- Participatory budget and direct democracy – Gianpaolo Baiocchi
- Democratic media – Bob McChesney

Equality

- Basic income – Philippe van Parijs
- Gender equality and family – Janet Gornick
- Cooperatives -- Gar Alperowitz

2. *Energy, the environment, and global warming*: This plenary would focus on institutional designs for countering global warming 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 is 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.