

Memos to Section Newsletters

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I have sent letters to each of the 50 ASA sections and sections-in-information describing the real utopias theme and how I am thinking about the structure of the program. In each letter I inserted a brief statement about how the theme might resonate with the intellectual agenda of specific sections. Below are all of the specific paragraphs inserted for each section. After these I include the common letter in which these appear.

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 our 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.

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.

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 Proudhon 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.

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 discussion 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.

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.

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.

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.

**AN OPEN letter to the ASA sections about
the Real Utopias theme of the 2012 ASA annual meeting**

**Erik Olin Wright
November, 2010**

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.

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Information about submitting proposals for different kinds of panels for the meeting can be found at: http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/septoct10/2012_0910.html.

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 flexible 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 possible 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 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 a Brazilian city, 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 little 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. 19th 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.