



REAL UTOPIAS



Emancipatory Projects, Institutional Designs, Possible Futures

107th ASA Annual Meeting
August 17-20
Denver, CO



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

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Revised, May 7, 2011

The theme for the 2012 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association 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.

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

The 2012 ASA annual meeting will explore a wide range of substantive problems connected to these kinds of empirical and theoretical real utopias agendas. A number of different kinds of sessions are being planned around this theme: (1) three plenary sessions, during which nothing else is officially scheduled at the conference; (2) one set of a fifteen or so thematic panels organized around specific proposals for real utopian institutional designs, with one primary speaker and one commentator; (3) a second set of 40 or so thematic panels organized around

topics with 3-4 presentations; (4) a special presidential panel to explore that broad problem of progressive social change in the 21st century; (5) and a number of special events featuring films or performances connected to the theme. Below is a brief sketch of each of these elements of the program.

1. PLENARY SESSIONS

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

Plenary 1. Equality

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

Plenary 2. Democracy

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

Plenary 3. Sustainability

Few problems pose a bigger challenge to contemporary capitalist societies than environmental sustainability. Global warming looms as potentially catastrophic, and there are good arguments that capitalism as a political-economic system is not only incapable of effectively dealing with this impending crisis, but is itself one of the core causal processes generating the problem. Yet, there is relatively little public discussion of rigorously argued real-utopian institutional designs for dealing effectively with climate change and other aspects of environmental sustainability. This will be the theme of the third plenary.

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

2. REAL UTOPIA PROPOSALS SESSIONS

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

These institutional proposal sessions will be organized as follows:

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

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

REAL UTOPIAS PROPOSAL SESSIONS
(CONFIRMED AS OF MARCH 1, 2011)

| Topic | Author of anchor essay | Affiliation |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Unconditional Basic Income | Philippe van Parijs | Louvain-le-Neuve, Belgium |
| 2. A democratic media system | Robert McChesney | U. Illinois |
| 3. Productive Democracy | Joel Rogers | U. Wisconsin |
| 4. Democratizing finance | Fred Block | U.C. Davis |
| 5. Participatory budgeting | Gianpaolo Baiocchi | Brown University |
| 6. Reinvigorating representative democracy | Bruce Ackerman | Yale Law School |
| 7. Deliberative referenda, policy juries, Randomocracy, citizens assemblies | John Gastil | U. Washington |
| 8. Transforming the gender division of labor in the family | Janet Gornick | CUNY Grad Center |
| 9. Parecon (participatory economics) | Michael Albert | Z-magazine |
| 10. A framework for a digital network economy | Yochai Benkler | Harvard Law School |
| 11. Public education (two proposals) | Harry Brighouse Michael Fielding and Peter Moss | U. Wisconsin Institute of Education, London |
| 12. Imagining a world beyond gender | Judith Lorber & Barbara Risman | CUNY Grad. Center University of Illinois-Chicago |
| 13. Transparency: from open government to open society | Archon Fung | JFK School, Harvard |
| 14. Race | Eduard Bonilla-Silva | Duke University |
| 15. Worker-Ownership | Joseph Blasi | Rutgers University |
| 16. Agro-food systems | Harriet Friedman | U. Toronto |
| 17. Universities | Michael Burawoy | U.C. Berkeley |
| 18. Reimagining the Corporation | Gerald Davis | U. Michigan |
| 19. Can Philanthropy be part of a Real Utopia? | Rob Reich | Stanford University |

3. THEMATIC PANELS AROUND BROAD TOPICS

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

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

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

1. Plenitude: beyond consumerism (Juliet Schor)
2. Workers’ search for utopia (Howard Kimmeldorf and Barry Eidlin)
3. Carework (Nancy Folbre)
4. Activism and carework
5. Worker Cooperatives: Mondragon and other cases (Ramon Flecha and colleagues, Barcelona, and Carolina Munoz and Ofer Sharone, United States)
6. Marxism and Real Utopias (Rhonda Levine)
7. Real Utopia solutions to Climate Change (Robert Bruelle)
8. Real Utopias, Myopia and the Future of the Family (Judith Treas)
9. Exploring Sexual Possibilities (Virginia Rutter)
10. Real Utopian Childhood (Karin Martin)
11. Sustainable Cities (Michael Goldman)
12. Real Multiculturalisms (organizer pending)
13. Race and Racial Justice (organizer pending)
14. Utopian Lessons Learned: Intentional Communities (Mamie Goldman)
15. Alternatives to Contemporary Agro-Food Systems (Isidor Wallimann)
16. Peer-to-peer collaborative production systems
17. Real Utopias Data Systems and Performance Metrics (Jerry Jacobs)
18. Democratizing Global Governance (Christopher Chase-Dunn)
19. Borderless World (John Urry)
20. Creating Workplace Gender Equality (William Bielby)
21. Real Utopias Visions of Marriage (Pepper Schwartz)
22. Utopian visions and Religion (Orit Avishai)
23. Post-Colonial Globalization: paths of the unthinkable (Philip McMichael)
24. K-12 Education (Jennifer Jennings)
25. Decline and Renewal of US Higher Education (Mitchell Stevens)
26. Diversity in Universities (Joey Sprague)
27. The Welfare State abroad: advice for America (Salvatore Babones)
28. Social Insurance and the Risk Society (organizer pending)

29. Alternatives Communities for the Elderly (Natalia Sarkisian)
30. Real Utopias behind Prison Walls (Michael Jacobson)
31. Alternative Approaches to Punishment (Katherine Beckett)
32. Contemporary Sexualities and Social Justice (Mignon Moore)
33. Collaborative Governance (organizer pending)
34. Alternative Currencies (Ed Collom)
35. Fair Trade (Laura Reynolds)
36. The social and solidarity economy (Marguerite Mendell)
37. Sociology as a discipline (Jerry Jacobs)
38. The future of reproduction (Frances Kissling)
39. Real Utopian Lessons from American History (organizer pending)
40. Participatory Budgeting: comparative cases (Ernesto Ganuza)
41. Islamic Utopias (Charles Kurzman)
42. World Social Forum (Lauren Langman)
43. Art's New Promise: emancipation, empowerment, enlightenment, or it is just economics? (Karen Coleman)
44. Dystopian Counterpoint: analyzing decline and fall (George Steinmetz)
45. Is post-gender Utopia Possible? (Kristen Schilt)
46. Perceptions – creating real utopias for Persons with disabilities (Jeffrey Houser)
47. Virtual utopias and dystopias (A. Aneesh)
48. Blocking the Low Road and paving the high (Andrew Shrank and Josh Whitford)
49. Networked individualism and the triple revolution: the turn to social networks, the personal internet, and always-available mobile connectivity (Barry Wellman)
50. Practicing Freedom in the classroom: toward a sociology of critical pedagogy (Patricia Hill Collins)
51. Robust Empowerment and grassroots activism (John Gaventa)

4. SPECIAL PRESIDENTIAL PANEL

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

5. SPECIAL THEMATIC EVENTS

In addition to standard academic conference sessions, we are hoping to have a number of less conventional events in which the theme of real utopias is expressed. One possibility is a real utopias film series at the conference, featuring documentaries of different kinds of real utopian experiments. We are also planning to have at the opening plenary a performance of spoken-word poetry that embodies the ideas expressed in the subtitle to the conference theme: emancipatory projects, institutional designs, possible futures.