“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. This opens a wide and challenging agenda for sociology:

- Empirical studies of innovative contemporary institutions and practices around the world that in one way or another prefigure emancipatory alternatives to dominant social structures and institutions. The task here is both to seek out the best and most interesting examples of innovation, and to understand the limits, contradictions, and dilemmas which they confront.
- Historical studies of attempts at building real utopias, both for specific institutions and for broader projects of social transformation.
- Analysis of reform proposals for specific institutions – for example, universities, criminal justice, the media, city government, the financial system, food systems, environmental regulation, the internet, intellectual property, the military, corporations – that focus both on the way a given proposal might help solve pressing current problems and point in the direction of broader real utopian transformations.
- Systematic theoretical models of alternative institutions at both the micro-level and the macro-level, with particular attention to the normative ideals and trade-offs of different institutional designs.
- Studies of the role of utopian thinking in sociological theory, philosophy and other forms of social thought.
- Research on discourses about social alternatives in the popular imagination and social movements.
- Research on various political processes and social struggles involved in advancing and opposing real utopian transformations.
- Methodological discussions of the problem of studying limits of possibility and the transformations of such limits.
- Explorations of the dilemmas of linking strong normative commitments to empirical research.

The 2012 meeting of the ASA will explore this agenda in the context of the many subfields of sociology. We also welcome proposals for innovative formats for panels and sessions at the annual meeting.
Some specific plans for sessions

1. Real Utopia Proposals Sessions

These sessions will revolve around an elaborated real utopian design to resolve some domain of problems. Examples would include: unconditional basic income, K-12 education, market socialism, equality-sustaining parental leaves, participatory budgets, random-selection democratic assemblies, universities, worker cooperatives, stakeholder corporations, solidarity finance, etc. The sessions would be organized as follows:

- A proposal for institutional designs around some theme will be posted online by early 2012.
- 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.
- At the session there will be a very brief – 15-20 minute – presentation of the proposal and at most one commentary.
- People will be encouraged to come to the sessions with issues they want to raise.

2. Film/documentary sessions

I would like to have about ten 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 will either be presented by the filmmaker or by an expert who researches the case. Examples could include things like:

- The kibbutz
- Holding Ground – a film about the Dudley Street neighborhood association
- Public transportation – a film about innovative transportation in Brazil
- Local food, alternative agriculture

3. Thematic panels around disciplinary subfields

The program committee organizes a total of 50-60 Thematic panels. I would like to see these spanning the full range of subfields of the discipline. We will get many proposals, to be sure, but some possibilities would include:

- Utopian stands within sociological theory
- Utopian and dystopian visions
- The family
- Cities
- The corporation
- Multiculturalism
- International migration
- Methodological issues: nonevents and possible futures
- Criminal justice: crime & punishment
- Intentional communities
- 19th century utopian communities
- Transforming culture

4. Plenary Panels

The program contains up to three plenary sessions. Tentatively, I am thinking of the following possibilities:

1. Big Ideas for Real Utopias: This panel would feature very prominent advocates of specific real utopian proposals. I envision three presentations for this panel, each around some Big Idea. This could include, for example: Basic Income, Participatory Budgets and direct democracy, Gender Equality and the family.

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.

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.