

Sociology 929

Real Utopias

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Erik Olin Wright
Department of Sociology
University of Wisconsin

Many people are drawn to sociology because of moral concerns about social justice and the damaging effects of social conditions. While such concerns are reflected in much sociological research, usually this takes the form of the diagnosis and critique of existing institutions rather than the exploration of alternatives. A great deal of scholarship focuses on explaining the sources of social injustice and the causes and consequences of harmful social conditions; much less explores the design of alternatives to existing institutions that would help realize moral ideals of social justice and human flourishing. The idea of “real utopias” is meant to point sociology in this direction.

The expression “Real Utopias” is, of course, an oxymoron: Utopia means “nowhere” – a fantasy world of perfect harmony and social justice. When politicians want to summarily dismiss a proposal for social transformation as an impractical dream outside the limits of possibility, they call it “utopian”. 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 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, and above all utopian designs of viable institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.

Understood in this way, the idea of real utopias is a way of talking about practical institutional innovations that we can build in the world as it is that both prefigure emancipatory alternatives of a world that could be and move us in that direction. It thus identifies both a goal and a strategy.

This seminar will explore a wide range of real utopian institutional designs and proposals. The emphasis will be on institutional designs for which there are empirical cases, although we will spend some time talking about purely theoretical proposals as well.

Broad Objectives and Themes of the Seminar

1. **General ideas of Utopia & Real Utopia in social theory and research.** The idea of “utopia” has a long tradition in social thought, philosophy and literature. While this seminar is not about the history of utopianism and utopian thought, we will spend a little time at the beginning of the semester locating the agenda of the seminar with respect to that tradition.
2. **Empirical Cases:** Most of the substantive sessions of the seminar will be devoted to exploring a fairly wide range of empirical studies and theoretical discussions of real utopia institutions and issues. We will read these studies both for the substantive issues around a given kind of real utopia, but also as a way of enriching the elaboration of a methodological handbook on real utopias (see below)
3. **Methodological issues:** I would like to develop a general methodological guide for research on real utopias. One of our tasks in the seminar will be to continually think about this. The idea would be to develop a coherent agenda of themes and problems that any research on real utopias should address. This would include the following sorts of overlapping issues:
 - *What is the problem the real utopia is meant to solve?* What are the harms generated by prevailing institutions and social structures that the real utopia is meant to ameliorate?
 - *Basic Institutional Design principles:* What are the general elements in the institutional design of the real utopia? What are the forms of variation in these design elements across instances?
 - *How it works on the ground:* How does it really work in practice? How does variation in details of design affect the way the real utopia operates in practice?
 - *Moral foundations:* what emancipatory aspirations/values are in play?
 - *Trade-offs of values:* what emancipatory values are in tension in a given institutional design?
 - *Effects of contexts:* What are the ways in which the effects of an institutional design depend on the broader context in which it works? Are there contextual conditions of sustainability/viability including culture/subjective conditions? Are their designs which are more tolerant of adverse contexts, more resilient to shocks?
 - *Synergies:* Sometimes the effects of a given institutional design are amplified or muted by the presence of other institutions. Basic income, for example, might increase the viability of worker cooperatives. It is important in thinking about real utopias to think about such synergetic interactions and configurations.
 - *Dynamics and contradictions:* A key problem in thinking about real utopias is how they function over time. This involves examining unintended consequences and various kinds of positive and negative feedback processes. Are there inherent contradictions in the design of an institution? Are there counter-measures to deal with these?
 - *Scalability, replicability, transferability:* In many cases a particular kind of real utopia may work well in isolated niches and local settings. The innovative experiments may be especially vibrant because of very high self-selection of the people who participate or the presence of charismatic leadership. As part of a vision of social transformation, however, it is important to know whether such experiments can be scaled up, replicated and diffused.
 - *From here to there:* A wide range of issues are raised by the problem of moving from isolated instances of real utopias to broad so transformation. Are hybrid forms possible, and do they constitute obstacles or way stations? What kinds of social forces and coalitions are potential advocates for different real utopias? What is the plausible interplay of symbiotic and interstitial strategic logics in transformation?

4. **Mapping the variety of real utopias:** As part of the seminar, there will be a semester-long collective project of building as comprehensive an inventory as we can of real utopian proposals and institutions. This involves both the descriptive task of assembling a list of examples and the theoretical/conceptual task of figuring out the best way of classifying the examples into theoretically-defined types. For example, I would argue that Wikipedia is a real utopia because of its egalitarian, nonhierarchical and open structure of participation. But what is it an instance of? What other examples should it be grouped with? Throughout the semester, participants in the seminar will be encouraged to bring in new real utopia examples to add to our collective list and then have an on-going discussion of alternative ways of grouping the inventory.
5. **A long term project: *Handbook on Real Utopias*:** Ultimately I would like to develop a fairly comprehensive handbook on real utopias. This would include the methodological guide already mentioned in #3, and would also have short chapters on each general type of real utopia referred to in #4. I see this seminar as laying some of the groundwork for this project in which some students in the seminar may want to continue after the semester is over. Eventually this handbook could be part of the Real Utopias Project series published by Verso.

Assignments

Weekly Reading Interrogations

Each week all students in the class have to prepare short written “interrogations”, 150-300 words long, engaging some theme or problem in the reading. These interrogations should **NOT** be summaries or exegeses of the texts; nor should they be mini-essays with extended commentaries on the readings. The point is to pose focused questions that will serve as the basis for the seminar discussion. As you do the reading each week, think about an issue that you really want discussed and clarified, and then formulate an interrogation to set up that discussion. While you will need to explicate each question you pose – that is, lay out what you see are the issues in play in the question, explain what you mean by it, etc. – you do not need to stake out a position with respect to the issues you raise (although you can do this if you want to). The important thing is to pose a clear question that you want to discuss. It is entirely appropriate for questions to focus on ideas, arguments, or passages which you do not understand. It often turns out that questions mainly concerned with asking for clarification of some obscure formulation in the reading provoke especially good discussions in the class. What you should avoid is a list of unelaborated questions.

These interrogations must be emailed to Erik Wright by 3.p.m. each Monday. Late interrogations will not be accepted.

Semester Writing Project

The written work for the semester will be built around contributions to a possible *Handbook on Real Utopias*. Students can work on these individually or in groups. (My experience is that in practice two-person semester projects are much easier to do successfully than projects involving larger groups). Each contribution should center on a single type of real utopia. The idea here is not to write a general essay on the problem of real utopias or an exploration of purely theoretical ideas of alternative macro-structural models of economy and society. Rather, each project should pick a specific kind of institutional proposal for which there are at least partial, prefigurative examples in the world today. The array of possibilities will become clearer as the semester progresses, but here is partial list:

Production

1. Worker-owned enterprises: cooperatives and ESOPs
2. Peer-to-peer collaborative production: Wikipedia, open-source software
3. Community owned fab-labs
4. Urban agriculture with community land trusts

Finance

5. Solidarity finance
6. Micro-finance (progressive vs exploitative forms)
7. Open crowd-sourced financing of projects (crowdfunding): Kickstarter, Artspire, etc.

Distribution

8. Open-access intellectual property: creative commons, copy-left,
9. Consumer cooperatives (possible real utopian forms?)
10. Open-source pharmaceuticals
11. Internet-based gift-economy in music
12. Unconditional basic income
13. Local currency systems
14. Equal exchange, fair trade certification (grassroots versions)
15. Cooperative supply chains

Democracy

16. Participatory budgeting
17. The Quebec social economy council
18. Policy juries
19. Randomocracy: citizens assemblies, citizens referenda review panels

Community and the Environment

20. Ecovillages, Transition towns
21. intentional communities
22. co-housing

In the course of the semester we will develop a common agenda and format for these projects which will include at least some of the themes mentioned under “methodological issues” above. The following is a preliminary, rough indication of some of the sections that will probably be in the final papers:

- *Introduction: Alternative to what?* What is the dominant institution for which this is an alternative? What is the basic problem the real utopian alternative institution is trying to solve? This is basically stage-setting for the analysis.
- *Normative issues.* What emancipatory aspirations/values are in play? What values are in tension in a given institutional design?
- *Basic elements of institutional design.* This would be an analytical description of the core design principles of the institution. This can be elaborate or quite simple depending on the case.
- *An empirical case: How it works.* Each project you include an empirical discussion of at least one case that is an instance of the general type of institution. What are the mechanics of the institution in practice? How does it really work on the ground? This should have a real empirical focus. Where possible this could also include discussion of variations – of the different ways the general design principles are put into practice (eg. Variations in the form of PB or worker cooperatives)
- *Dilemmas, bottlenecks, problems.* What are some of the problems faced by the institution? What are its prospects?
- *A (modest) bibliographic essay with an annotated bibliography.* I do not expect a full-blown review essay of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, but it is important to get a rough map of the on-going discussions around whatever institution you explore. By “annotated” I mean that there are a few sentences about each item, indicating its central point and relevance.

Timeline for Semester project

October 2. Statement of research topic.

This should include: 1) a very brief description of the real utopian institution that will be the focus of the project, 2) if possible, an indication of the empirical case or cases that will be discussed, 3) at least a few preliminary bibliographical references.

November 6. Initial annotated bibliography.

I have no specified number of entries for this. The important point is to have done a significant amount of reading about the topic.

December 7-8. Oral presentations of research.

These reports will be given at the weekend retreat (see below).

December 20. Written report.

This is the last day you can give me the written report to avoid an Incomplete for the seminar

January 17. Due date for incomplete papers.

Unless special arrangements have been made, incomplete papers need to be handed in before the beginning of second semester.

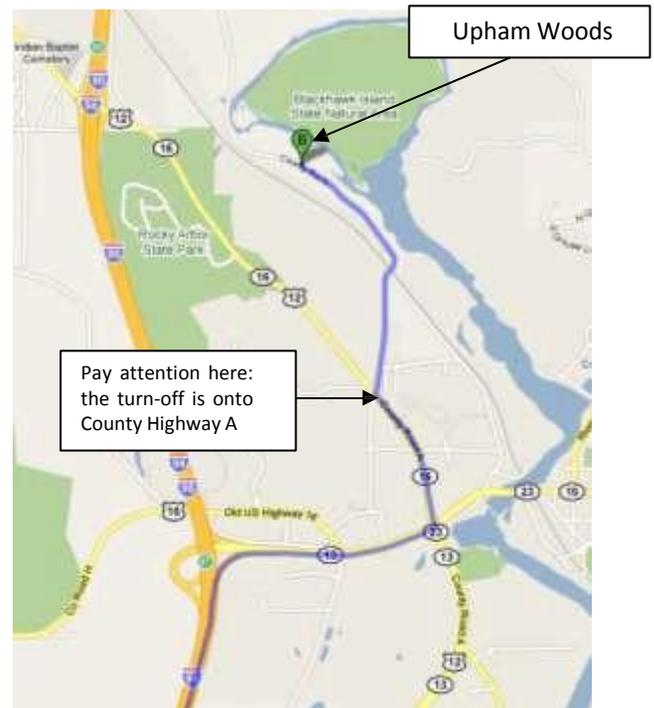
SPECIAL EVENT, DECEMBER 7-8: WEEKEND RETREAT ON REAL UTOPIAS

On the last weekend of the semester – December 8-9 – we will have a two-day retreat to discuss all of the semester projects in the class. Yves Cabannes, a leading authority on Participatory Budgeting and other real utopian innovations, will also join us for the retreat. If there is time, one of the sessions at the retreat will be devoted to a broad, free-wheeling discussion of his work on reinventing cities.

The retreat will be held at Upham Woods, a beautiful University of Wisconsin facility on the Wisconsin River about an hour north of Madison. In addition to the academic discussion, the retreat will also include a gourmet potluck and party Saturday evening – with music, dancing, singing, general carousing – and, if we have snow, a couple of hours of tobogganing on a wonderful toboggan run at the conference center.

Spouses/partners, friends and children are also welcome to come for the weekend – there are nice activities in the area for children while the workshop is in session (including indoor water Parks in Wisconsin Dells). I will cover part of the costs of the retreat, so the out-of-pocket expenses will be \$40/person for room and board.

Directions to Upham Woods



Seminar Readings and Weekly Schedule

Summer Reading

I would like the first session of the seminar on Wednesday, September 4, to be a substantive session, not just an occasion to go over the syllabus and meet each other. I also think it would be good for participants in the seminar to mull over some of the main themes we will discuss over the summer.

In the first two sessions I would like to discuss the broad, overarching problem of what it means to think about emancipatory alternatives to existing institutions and social structures. My approach to these issues is very much embedded in the intersection of the Marxian tradition and contemporary social science. While I do raise a range of philosophical issues around the moral foundations of social emancipation, my approach is mostly oriented towards the scientific exploration of viable institutional designs for realizing those values. I thus have not spent much time thinking about the traditions of utopian thought that are found in various philosophical and literary works. In the first two sessions of the seminar we will discuss these two, broad approaches to grappling with alternatives. The reading for these sessions should be done, if at all possible, during the summer.



Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).



Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso, 2010). I would also recommend students read the slightly updated exposition of the central arguments of the book in my ASR article: "[Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias](#)," *American Sociological review*, February, 2013

If you have time during the summer, there are a number of books that explore utopian ideas in various ways that could be worth reading into:

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*

Marge Percy, *Woman at the Edge of Time*

Ursula LaGuin, *The Dispossessed*

Thomas More, *Utopia*

Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: means of livelihood and ways of life* (Vintage, 1960)

Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse University Press: 1996. Originally published 1950)

Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 1982 and 2001)

Topic Schedule

1. 9/4	Utopian thought and Real Utopias
2. 9/11	Utopian thought and Real Utopias
3. 9/18	Participatory budgeting
4. 9/25	Economic democracy: general considerations
5. 10/2	Worker cooperatives
6. 10/9	Peer-to-peer collaborative production
7. 10/16	Unconditional basic income
8. 10/24	Randomocracy
9. 10/30	Participatory economics: debate with Robin Hahnel
10. 11/7	Community Organizing and Real Utopias
11. 11/14	Environmental Real Utopias: Ecovillages, transition towns, Plenitude
12. 11/21	Democratizing Finance
No Session	Thanksgiving break
13. 12/5	Cities: visit by Yves Cabannes
14. 12/7-8	end of semester weekend workshop

Weekly reading assignments

Sessions 1 & 2. Utopian Thought and Real Utopias

Most of this seminar will be spent studying theoretical models and empirical cases of various sorts of real utopias, focusing especially on instances where good empirical research exists, rather than on the more abstract task of charting the meta-theoretical foundations of the utopian face of emancipatory social science or the history of utopian thought. Nevertheless, since the idea of utopia has such a long pedigree in social thought, and since it is often very controversial to suggest that utopian ideas can be constructive, I thought it would be useful to begin the seminar with a brief exploration of the diverse ways in which utopia figures in social theory, especially in the submerged ways in which it has shaped sociology.

The idea of utopia has played a significant, if often contradictory, role in the history of social thought, cultural expression, and political movements. Sometimes the idea of Utopia is affirmed as a way of charting the direction for emancipatory social transformation and motivating people to struggle for a better world: It is an expression of hope, of longing, even of the emancipatory moments in the world as it is that foreshadow the world as it might be:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias. -- Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever. -- Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge*

There is nothing like dream to create the future. Utopia today, flesh and blood tomorrow. -- Victor Hugo

Utopia lies at the horizon.

When I draw nearer by two steps,
it retreats two steps.

If I proceed ten steps forward, it
swiftly slips ten steps ahead.

No matter how far I go, I can never reach it.

What, then, is the purpose of utopia?

It is to cause us to advance. -- Eduardo Galeano

...I take as a point of departure the possibility and desirability of a fundamentally different form of society--call it communism, if you will--in which men and women, freed from the pressures of scarcity and from the insecurity of everyday existence under capitalism, shape their own lives. Collectively they decide who, how, when, and what shall be produced. Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*:

In Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full, no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity; and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties. -- Thomas more, *Utopia*

None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace. -- Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourses of my book friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness. -- Helen Keller

But mostly, the invocation of "Utopia" is a way of attacking political opponents for pursuing self-defeating, destructive fantasies:

Every daring attempt to make a great change in existing conditions, every lofty vision of new possibilities for the human race, has been labeled Utopian. -- Emma Goldman

It may be that the best we can hope for when it comes to utopias is that they be held at arm's length and regarded as aesthetic constructions, in which various proportions are neatly worked out, contradictions eliminated, and outside intrusions minimized. They are fictions, artifacts of culture. And we should be wary if they ever become much more. — Edward Rothstein, *Visions of Utopia*

Nearly all creators of Utopia have resembled the man who has toothache, and therefore thinks happiness consists in not having toothache.... Whoever tries to imagine perfection simply reveals his own emptiness. -- George Orwell, *Why Socialists Don't Believe in Fun*

If people would forget about utopia! When rationalism destroyed heaven and decided to set it up here on earth, that most terrible of all goals entered human ambition. It was clear there'd be no end to what people would be made to suffer for it. -- Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daug*

I can imagine no man who will look with more horror on the End than a conscientious revolutionary who has, in a sense sincerely, been justifying cruelties and injustices inflicted on millions of his contemporaries by the benefits which he hopes to confer on future generations: generations who, as one terrible moment now reveals to him, were never going to exist. Then he will see the massacres, the faked trials, the deportations, to be all ineffaceably real, an essential part, his part, in the drama that has just ended: while the future Utopia had never been anything but a fantasy. -- C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night*

Utopia is a mixture of childish rationalism and secularized angelism. -- Emil Cioran, *History & Utopia*

The search for Nirvana, like the search for Utopia or the end of history or the classless society, is ultimately a futile and dangerous one. It involves, if it does not necessitate, the sleep of reason. There is no escape from anxiety and struggle. — Christopher Hitchens, *Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays*

Utopia is a dream that builds hope; utopia is a nightmare that creates fear. This contentious cultural and political history of utopian discourses is one of the background contexts for this seminar.

In these first two sessions we will discuss some of the themes in this history of social thought by focusing mostly on Ruth Levitas' book *Utopia as Method*. She traces the ways in which the idea of utopia, broadly understood as the belief that another (and better) world is possible, is present in different ways throughout the history of social theory in general and sociological theory in particular. She proposes as specific way of using this thread of social theory as a "method" for understanding theory and studying the world. While this way of exploring the idea of utopia in a very different way from my approach in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, I think we ultimately share the same fundamental aspiration: to develop theoretical tools that facilitate emancipatory social science.

Readings

Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

Erik Olin wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso, 2010).

Erik Olin Wright, "[Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias](#)," *American Sociological review*, February, 2013

Session 3. Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a transformation of the way urban budgets are created. Instead of city budgets being created by technical experts working with politicians, the budget is created by ordinary citizens meeting in popular assemblies and voting on budget alternatives. In the model of PB initiated in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in the early 1990s by the Brazilian Workers Party, neighborhood assemblies throughout the city are empowered to debate budgetary priorities, to propose specific kinds of budgetary projects and then to choose delegates to a citywide budget council who bring all of the proposals from the different neighborhood assemblies together and reconcile them into a coherent city budget. This basic model has spread to many other cities in Latin America and elsewhere, most recently in a novel form to some city council districts in Chicago and New York. The result is a budget much more closely reflecting the democratic ideal of equal access of citizens to participate meaningfully in the exercise of power.

Participatory budgeting has become, perhaps, the iconic example of a real utopian institutional design for deepening democracy. It is also an example which has been copied and modified in many places, so there are now many empirical cases. As a result there is considerable empirical research exploring how it works, why it often fails to deliver on its aspirations, what might be the prospects for a deepening and expanding of its goals. In this session we will both explore the underlying principles of PB and the dilemmas which it faces in its real implementation in diverse ways and contexts.

Readings

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy* (Verso: 2003)

Chapter 1. Thinking About Empowered Participatory Governance

Chapter 2. Participation, Activism and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment, by Gianpaolo Baiocchi

Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered", *Politics & Society*, forthcoming

Additional Reading on Participatory budgeting

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a redistributive democracy," *Politics & Society*, Dec 1998

Gianpaolo Baiocchi. *Militants and Citizens* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005)

Giovanni Allegretti and Carsten Herzberg, *Participatory Budgets in Europe* (Amsterdam: TNI, 2007)

Brian Wampler, "Can participatory institutions promote pluralism? Mobilizing low-income citizens in Brazil." *Studies in Comparative and International Development* 41:4 (2007): 57-58.

Leonardo Avritzer. *Participatory institutions in democratic Brazil*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Yves Sintomer, Carsten Herzberg and Giovanni Allegretti, *Learning from the South: participatory budgeting worldwide* (Bonn: InWEnt gGmbH, 2010)

Session 4. Economic democracy and cooperatives: general theoretical considerations

Perhaps the oldest vision for an emancipatory alternative to capitalism is the worker-owned firm. Capitalism began by dispossessing workers of their means of production and then employing them as wage-laborers in capitalist firms. The most straightforward undoing of that dispossession is its reversal through worker-owned firms. In most times and places, however, worker cooperatives are quite marginal within market economies, occupying small niches rather than the core of the economic system. One striking exception is the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain, a conglomerate of over 100 separate worker cooperatives that produce a wide range of goods and services including high-end refrigerators, auto parts, bicycles, industrial robots and much more. The cooperatives in the conglomerate have weathered the severe Spanish economic crisis much better than conventional capitalist firms.

In this session and the next we will explore worker cooperatives as real utopias. In the first of these sessions our focus will be on theoretical issues. Tom Malleson builds an argument for worker cooperatives as a realization of broader ideas of economic democracy. His purpose is to explore the philosophical foundations for the idea that economies should be organized in a democratic manner and then show how worker cooperatives embody this ideal. Henry Hansman offers sympathetically skeptical analysis of the prospects of worker-owned firms, highlighting the ways in which complexity and size may make democratic governance inefficient and costly.

Readings

Tom Malleson. *After Occupy: Economic Democracy for the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2014), pp. 18-93 (especially focus on pp.39-93)

Henry Hansman, *The Ownership of Enterprise* (Harvard University Press, 1996) pp. 66-119

Session 5. Worker Ownership

In this session we will discuss a range of empirical case studies about worker cooperatives, especially pieces by Trevor Hyman-Young who is writing a dissertation-in-progress on the Madison worker cooperative, *Isthmus engineering*. We will also discuss Joseph Blasi and Douglas Kruse's arguments in favor of Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), a form of property rights in which employees own variable amounts of shares in the enterprises in which they work, but do not have democratic governance rights. An important issue is whether such forms of worker ownership can be thought of as embodying emancipatory ideals and thus part of a real utopian agenda, or, in contrast, are merely a way of aligning the interests of workers more closely with those of capitalists.

Readings

Trevor Hyman-Young, "Union Cab: Managing Growth and Deepening Democracy in a Worker Cooperative" in Borowiak, C., Dilworth, R., and Reynolds, A. (eds.) *Exploring Cooperatives: Economic Democracy and Community Development in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Trevor Hyman-Young, "Innovation for a Reason: A Theory of Organizational Authority and Innovation" (a paper about Mondragon), paper presented at the 2013 ASA meetings.

Selection from Trevor Hyman-Young, "Organizational Authority and Innovation: Democratic Employee Ownership in the Automated Manufacturing Equipment Industry", PhD dissertation in progress, selections t.b.a.

Billeaux, M., Reynolds, A., Young-Hyman, T., Zayim, A., 2011. "Worker Ownership Case Study: Isthmus Engineering and Manufacturing" U.W. Center for Cooperatives, Case Study Series. <http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/pdf/Staff%20Papers/Staff%20Paper%209.pdf>

Daphne Perkins Berry and Stu Schneider "Improving the Quality of Home Health Aide Jobs: A Collaboration between Organized Labor and a Worker Cooperative" in Edward J. Carberry (Ed.), *Employee Ownership and Shared Capitalism: New Directions and Debates for the 21st Century*, LERA Research Volume, 2011.

Matt Hancock, *Compete to Cooperate: the cooperative district of Imola* (Bacchilega editore, 2007), The Imola Model, pp. 53-93 (only odd-numbered pages)

Joseph R. Blasi and Douglas L. Kruse, "Broad-based Worker Ownership and Profit Sharing: Can These Ideas Work in the Entire Economy?" unpublished manuscript, 2012



Special issue of the magazine *Yes!* On worker cooperatives:

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/how-cooperatives-are-driving-the-new-economy>

Session 6. Peer-to-peer mutualism

The Internet and the digital information revolution open up a vast terrain for real utopian experiments. Wikipedia is perhaps the best known example. No one would have thought it was possible until it happened: Several hundred thousand people around the world actively cooperate without pay to write and edit what has become the world's largest encyclopedia (over 4 million English language entries in 2012, and at least some version of Wikipedia in over 100 languages) which is made available without charge to anyone in the world who has access to the internet. Wikipedia is an example of a more general model of non-hierarchical cooperative economic activity: peer-to-peer distributed production with open source property rights. Yochai Benkler explores the potential for such new collaborative forms of networked production in his book *The Wealth of Networks* and in his more recent essay in *Politics & Society*.

Readings

Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* (Yale University Press, 2006). Available for free download at: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/wealth_of_networks/Download_PDFs_of_the_book. Chapters 1-4, 11-12

Yochai Benkler, "Practical Anarchism", *Politics & Society*, 41:2, June 2013, pp. 213-251

Session 7. Unconditional Basic Income

Unconditional basic income (UBI) is a proposal to give every legal resident of a territory an income sufficient to live above the poverty line without any work requirement or other conditions. Nearly all existing public programs of income support would be eliminated. Minimum wage laws would also be eliminated since there would no longer be any reason to prohibit low-wage voluntary contracts once a person's basic needs are not contingent on that wage. UBI opens up a wide array of new possibilities for people. It guarantees that any young person can do an unpaid internship, not just those who have affluent parents who are prepared to subsidize them. Worker co-operatives would become much more viable since the basic needs of the worker-owners did not depend on the income generated by the enterprise. This also means worker cooperatives would be better credit risks to banks, making it easier for cooperatives to get loans. UBI, if it could be instituted at a relatively generous level, would move us decisively towards the egalitarian principle of giving everyone equal access to the conditions to live a flourishing life.

UBI has never been instituted in a comprehensive manner, although there have been a number of limited experiments in UBI and some examples of partial basic incomes (such as the Alaska Permanent Fund in which state revenues from oil royalties are distributed to Alaska citizens on an equal per capita basis, which in most years comes to a bit over \$1000/person). As a result, most of the debate over UBI revolves around theoretical issues. These can be grouped under two broad headings: (1) *Desirability*. Supposing we could get a UBI and that it was sustainable, would it in fact be desirable? Some people argue that in fact a UBI is exploitative: the lazy exploit the hard working, for there will be some people who choose to live entirely off of the UBI without contributing anything. UBI seems to contradict some basic notions of reciprocity and fairness. (2) *Viability*: The central issue here is that UBI potentially would have a variety of problematic macro-economic effects on labor supply, tax rates and investment rates. If everyone wants to be a couch potato, then a basic subsistence grant means that no one will enter the labor force. Clearly there is some low level of UBI which is viable: everyone in the United States could get \$1000/year without this creating self-destructive dynamics. The viability question is thus: what is the

maximum level of income at which an unconditional basic income is economically sustainable? Is it high enough to trigger the desirable effects of UBI?

Readings

Bruce Ackerman, Anne Alstott and Philippe van Parijs, *Redesigning Distribution* (Verso, 2006) Philippe van Parijs, "Basic Income: a simple and powerful idea for the twenty-first century," 3-42

Erik Olin Wright, "Basic Income, Stakeholder grants, and class Analysis", 91-100

Barbara Bergman, "A Swedish style Welfare State or Basic Income: which should have priority?" 130-142

Choose two other chapters to read

Philippe van Parijs, "The Universal Basic Income: why utopian thought matters and how sociologists can contribute to it," *Politics and Society*, 41-2, June 2013, pp. 171-182

Erik Olin Wright, "[Basic Income as a Socialist Project](#)" (*Basic Income Studies*, issue #1, 2006)

Session 8. Randomocracy

In recent years there have been a number of extremely interesting initiatives to introduce different kinds of random assemblies into democratic processes. The conventional way of understanding the idea of representative democracy is that representation is accomplished by citizens choosing political officials through elections to represent them in legislative and executive office. An alternative notion of representation would select political decision-makers through some kind of random selection process. This is more or less how juries are selected in many countries, and it was how legislative bodies were selected in Ancient Athens. The question, then, is whether such Random Selection Citizens Assembly (or Citizens Assembly for short) might be desirable and workable in the world today. Do they help solve certain difficult problems in conventional democratic institutions? Are they an alternative to electoral democracy or a supplement? What specific purposes might they be used for? What design problems do they face?

Readings

John Gastil and Robert Richards, "Making Direct Democracy Deliberative through Random Assemblies", *Politics & Society*, 41:2, June, 2013, pp. 253-282

Amy Lang, "But is it For Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a model of state-sponsored citizen empowerment", *Politics & Society*, 2007

Harry Brighouse and Erik Olin Wright, "A Proposal to Transform the House of Lords into a Citizens Assembly," unpublished manuscript, 2006

Session 9. Participatory economics: debate with Robin Hahnel

The idea of "real utopias" is both a way of talking about specific kinds of institutions and their transformation and about the vision for the broader transformation of entire socio-economic systems. Mostly our focus in the seminar has been on specific institutions. This week we turn our attention to a prominent model of a systemic alternative to capitalism: a participatory economy or as it is sometimes

called “parecon.” This idea has been developed over the past two decades or so through the collaboration of two economists, Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. The most widely read book laying out the model is by Michael Albert, *Parecon* (Verso: 2004). Robin Hahnel’s more recent elaboration of the core ideas, *Of the People, By the People: the case for a participatory economy*, is more succinct and lays out the central principles of the institutional design in a less strident manner.

Parecon envisions an economic system organized according to the following basic principles:

1. All significant economic decisions are made through a democratic process governed by the principle that people should be empowered to affect decisions proportionately to the extent that they are affected by those decisions.
2. This democratic principle extends to production decisions, investment decisions and consumption decisions, both for households and communities (i.e. public goods consumption).
3. The democratic decisions are made in a fully participatory manner under a principle of subsidiarity – that is, that the decision should be made at the lowest level possible within a nested structure of councils.
4. The coordination of these decisions takes place through a system of iterated participatory planning, which is described in some detail in the book.
5. This structure of planning replaces markets as a mechanism of economic coordination and integration. Markets disappear completely in a fully realized participatory economy.
6. Along with these principles of radical democratic participation, a participatory economy also embodies a radical egalitarian distribution of income based on two principles: (1) Remuneration is exclusively on the basis of effort (rather than skills or contribution or productivity), and (2) adequate basic income to meet needs is given to anyone unable to work.

While I strongly endorse the values underling this model, I am skeptical about the viability of some of its institutional design principles. I have recently been engaged in a soon-to-be published debate with Robin Hahnel on these issues.

Reading

Robin Hahnel, *Of the People, By the People: the case for a participatory economy* (Soapbox, 2012)

Erik Olin Wright, “Thoughts on the Institutions for a Participatory Economy: a dialogue with Robin Hahnel,” manuscript prepared for the *New Left Project* (www.newleftproject.org)

Session 10. Community Organizing as a Real Utopia

The idea of “community organizing” is generally associated with efforts by various kinds of grassroots organizations to mobilize energies within a community to solve some kind of local problem – gangs, drug addiction, police harassment, deterioration of housing, etc. Sometimes there is also an implication of an outsider to the community coming in and leading or facilitating this process; other times the image is of a more internal, organic process. Often community organizing is seen as connected to a focused campaign of some sort. In this way of understanding organizing, it is largely seen as an instrumental activity to accomplish some goal. But community organizing can also be seen as itself a constituent element in an alternative model of community, as a permanent feature of an ideal community, as an end in itself rather than simply a means to an end. In this way of thinking about community organizing it is a type of real utopia, a way of acting in the world as it is that prefigures the world as it should (and could) be. In this session we will explore the connection between community organizing and real utopias in a discussion with Brian Christens, a professor in the Civil Society and Community Research program in the School of Human Ecology.

Readings t.b.a.

Session 11. Environmental Real Utopias: Transition towns Ecovillages, Plenitude,

It hardly needs saying that environmental crises pose among the biggest challenges in the world today. For many progressives, in fact, it is the most urgent problem humanity faces because of the specter of global warming and environmental collapse, but even if one pulls back from the more apocalyptic visions of an uninhabitable planet, there is no question that environmental issues – global warming, peak oil, ground water depletion, dispersed chemical toxicity and contamination, etc. – will increasingly generate great harms.

In this session we will discuss what can be thought of as real utopian responses to these challenges: ways of building alternative institutions that foster sustainable ways of life. Our focus will not be on the array of critical state policies needed to deal with the environment. These are obviously of great importance, and it is implausible that a solution to environmental problems – or even a tolerable adaptation to a deteriorating environment – can be done without significant involvement of affirmative state action. Our focus, instead, will be on possible bottom-up real utopian responses to environmental challenges. We will give particular attention to what is sometimes called the “Transition movement” which focuses on community initiatives to enhance sustainability. As Rob Hopkins, founder of the transition movement, explains in *The Transition Companion*, the background assumption for the movement is: “If we wait for governments, it’ll be too little, too late. If we act as individuals, it’ll be too little. But if we act as communities, it might be just enough, just in time.” Whether or not community action will be “just enough” is debatable, but nevertheless such projects could help create conditions under which it might then become possible to mobilize more effectively for larger scale, government involvement at the more macro level. In any case, this reflects one type of real utopian response to social transformation around environmental issues.

Readings

Juliet Schor, *True Wealth* (Penguin, 2012) (original title: *Plenitude*)

John Urry, *Climate change and society* (Polity Press, 2011), pp. 122-168

John Barry, *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability* (Oxford, 2012), chapter 3, “Resilience, Transition, and Creative Adaptability,” and chapter 6, “Green Political Economy II: Solidarity and Sharing”, pp. 78-116, and 180-214

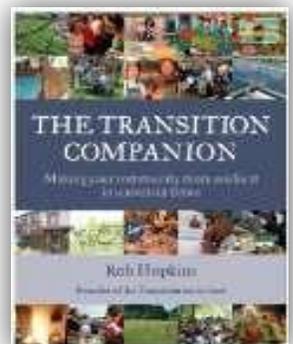
Rob Hopkins, *The Transition companion* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011)
available at: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

Other reading

Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* (London: Earthscan, 2009)



<http://vimeo.com/26573848>



Session 12. Democratizing Finance

There are few topics as challenging for Real Utopian thinking than finance. On the one hand finance is complicated and the existing institutions are immensely powerful and constitute one of the pivotal aspects of global capitalism that block democratic egalitarian social change. On the other hand, any vision of transcending capitalism through building real utopias – through creating new institutions within cracks and spaces in the existing world – must somehow or other create mechanisms for channeling resources to real utopian projects and enterprises.

Like many real utopian innovations, there is a certain kind of inherent tension in trying to create real utopia Financial institutions within capitalism: to be viable, replicable and scalable, they must in some sense or other “fit in” to a capitalist environment. Alternative institutions that function entirely on the margins of society can survive without being functionally compatible with capitalism. But alternatives that aspire to become significant elements within the “economic ecosystem” generally need to have some sort of symbiotic relation to capitalism. Thus, even as they embody design principles that express democratic-egalitarian values, real utopian finance institutions – if they are to avoid marginality – must also successfully interface with capitalism. And this, of course, also poses the potential of being absorbed by capitalism. One particularly interesting example of this tension is “Crowdfunding” finance, which both enables bottom-up, grassroots funding of projects, but also can be a vehicle for enhancing the effectiveness of ordinary capitalist venture capital.

This session will explore some of the parameters of the problem of democratizing finance but exploring the proposals being developed by Fred Block. Fred will join us via Skype conversation for this session.

Readings

Fred Block, “Democratizing Finance,” forthcoming in *Politics & Society*

Marguerite Mendell and Rocío Nogales, “Solidarity Finance: An Evolving Landscape,” *Universitas Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2012

Matt Flannery “Kiva and the Birth of Person-to-Person Microfinance,” *Innovations* / winter & spring 2007 pp. 31-56

Kevin Lawton and Dan Marom, *The Crowd-funding revolution* (McGraw Hill, 2013). chapter 5, “the rise of crowdfunding” and chapter 9, “Infrastructure and ecosystems” pp. 47-66121-144



Session 13. Real Utopian Cities: visit by Yves Cabannes

Many of the specific institutions we have been exploring this semester are connected to the political economy of cities. This week we will be joined by Yves Cabannes, an professor of urban development at the University of London, who will be a visiting scholar at the Havens Center. In his work he connects many of the specific real utopian institutions we have been discussing into a vision for a new kind of urban environment:

- (i) Participatory Budgeting
- (ii) Alternatives to forced evictions – staying in place
- (iii) Housing and Employment co-operatives
- (iv) Community Land Trusts (CLTS)
- (v) Complementary and local currencies
- (vi) Urban and peri-urban Agriculture, from a food sovereignty perspective

This week he will be giving two lectures at the Havens Center which students are encouraged to attend, and he will join us for our regular seminar session Wednesday evening. He will also participate in the weekend workshop retreat on real utopias.

2013 FALL ALTERNATIVE CURRENCIES LAND TENURE RIGHT TO HOUSING THE CITY URBAN TRANSFORMATION

“ANOTHER CITY IS POSSIBLE!” ALTERNATIVES TO THE CITY AS A COMMODITY

Yves Cabannes
Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College of London

“Local and Complementary Currencies and their Role in Radical Urban Transformation”
Tuesday, December 3, 4pm, 206 Ingham

“Communal and Collective forms of Land Tenure and the Right to Housing”
Wednesday, December 4, 4pm, 206 Ingham

Open Seminar for Students, Faculty and Public
Thursday, December 5, 12-20pm

YVES CABANNES is Professor and Chair of Development Planning at Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London. From 2004 to 2006 he was lecturer in Urban Planning at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and an economist, planner and urban specialist. From 1997 until December 2003, he was the regional Coordinator of the UN Habitat/UNEP Urban Management Program for Latin America and the Caribbean. He has particular experience and interest in urban agriculture & Food sovereignty, local currencies, participatory planning, municipal public policies, low cost housing, participatory budgeting, community-based micro credit systems and appropriate technologies for local development. He is an advocate on development and rights issues and was the convener for the UN Advisory Group on Forced Evictions (2004-2010) and the senior advisor to the Municipality of Porto Alegre, Brazil, for the international network on participatory budgeting. He is currently a member of the board of the International RUAF Foundation (Resource Centres for Urban Agriculture and Food Security), The World Fund for City Development (Metropolis), HuZhi (Participation Centre, Chengdu China) and the Participatory Budgeting Project (USA).

Reading

Yves Cabannes, “Urban movements and NGOs: So near, so far,” *The City* (online journal), published June 18, 2013

Other topics

Because of time constraints, there were a number of other topics that I had initially planned to include in the seminar but which had to be dropped. Here are a few of these with some limited readings.

Revitalizing Representative Democracy

Bruce Ackerman, "Reviving Democratic Citizenship," *Politics & Society*, 41:2, June, 2013, pp. 309-317

Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayers, *Voting with Dollars* (Yale University Press, 2002)

The Social Economy

Jean-Louis Laville, Benoît Lévesque and Marguerite Mendell "[The Social Economy, Diverse Approaches and Practices in Europe and Canada.](#)"

Nancy Neamtam, "[The Social Economy: Finding A Way Between The Market And The State](#)"

Time Banking

There is a longstanding argument in anarchist strands of progressive social movements that money is central to the destructive dynamics of the modern world. This intuition is also embodied in folk sayings like "money is the root of all evil" and in some Marxist accounts of communism, in which money no longer plays any role in the economy. At a theoretical level, this diagnosis is closely connected to the general critique of markets and commodification, the idea that when exchange processes and prices are governed by market competition, this inevitably generates exploitation, alienation, and domination. One response to this understanding of money has been to create alternative currencies rooted in the idea of the equivalence of labor time. Such time-based currency is also seen as a way for local communities to take more control over their local economic environment, particularly in contexts of high unemployment and marginalization. The basic idea of the simplest local currency systems is that people exchange hours of service to each other. When you perform a service you accumulate hours in a time bank, which you can then spend on other people's services. The currency is thus denominated in labor-time units. Such a system can be used in a very restrictive way in, for example, in activities like babysitting cooperatives, or more extensively for a much wider variety of services. In a few cases, as in the BonNetzBon local currency (BonNetzBon = GoodNetworkVoucher) in Basel, Switzerland, the local currency has an established exchange rate with the official currency and is used to facilitate broader forms of credit and exchange within the social economy (<http://www.viavia.ch/bnb/pmwiki.php?n=Kontext.SocialEconomyBasel>).

Readings:

Ed Collom, Judith Lasker, and Corinne Kyriacou, *Equal Time, Equal Value: community currencies and time banking in the U.S.* (Ashgate, 2012), selected chapters t.b.a.

PRINCIPLES FOR SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS

The following guidelines are intended to facilitate seminar discussions. Some of them may sound obvious, but from past experience it is still important to make them explicit.

1. READINGS. Do the readings carefully. At least for the first part of each seminar session the discussions should revolve systematically around the week's readings rather than simply the topic. There is a strong tendency in seminars, particularly among articulate graduate students, to turn every seminar into a general "bull session" in which participation need not be informed by the reading material in the course. The injunction to discuss the readings does not mean, of course, that other material is excluded from the discussion, but it does mean that the issues raised and problems analyzed should focus on around the actual texts assigned for the week.

2. LISTEN. In a good seminar, interventions by different participants are linked one to another. A given point is followed up and the discussion therefore has some continuity. In many seminar discussions, however, each intervention is unconnected to what has been said before. Participants are more concerned with figuring out what brilliant comment they can make rather than listening to each other and reflecting on what is actually being said. In general, therefore, participants should add to what has just been said rather than launch a new train of thought, unless a particular line of discussion has reached some sort of closure.

3. TYPES ON INTERVENTIONS. Not every seminar intervention has to be an earth-shattering comment or brilliant insight. One of the reasons why some students feel intimidated in seminars is that it seems that the stakes are so high, that the only legitimate comment is one that reveals complete mastery of the material. There are several general rules about comments that should facilitate broader participation:

- No intervention should be regarded as "naive" or "stupid" as long as it reflects an attempt at seriously engaging the material. It is often the case that what seems at first glance to be a simple or superficial question turns out to be among the most intractable.
- It is as appropriate to ask for clarification of readings or previous comments as it is to make a substantive point on the subject matter.
- If the pace of the seminar discussion seems too fast to get a word in edgewise it is legitimate to ask for a brief pause to slow things down. It is fine for there actually to be moments of silence in a discussion!

4. BREVITY. Everyone has been in seminars in which someone consistently gives long, overblown speeches. Sometimes these speeches may make some substantively interesting points, but frequently they meander without focus or direction. It is important to keep interventions short and to the point. One can always add elaborations if they are needed. This is not an absolute prohibition on long statements, but it does suggest that longer statements are generally too long.

5. EQUITY. While acknowledging that different personalities and different prior exposures to the material will necessarily lead to different levels of active participation in the seminar dis-

cussion, it should be our collective self-conscious goal to have as equitable participation as possible. This means that the chair of the discussion has the right to curtail the speeches by people who have dominated the discussion, if this seems necessary.

6. SPONTANEITY vs. ORDER. One of the traps of trying to have guidelines, rules, etc. in a discussion is that it can squelch the spontaneous flow of debate and interchange in a seminar. Sustained debate, sharpening of differences, etc., is desirable and it is important that the chair not prevent such debate from developing. I generally adopt what I call the one-hand/two-hand rule: When participants want to say something, they raise one hand and I put them on a list. If they want to respond to what has just been said and jump the queue, they can raise two hands. It is important, of course, to not use this as a way of raising entirely new issues, but engaging directly what was just said.

7. ARGUMENTS, COMPETITIVENESS, CONSENSUS. A perennial problem in seminars revolves around styles of discussion. Feminists have often criticized discussions dominated by men as being aggressive, argumentative, and competitive. Men, on the other hand, have at times been critical of what they see as the “feminist” model of discussion: searching for consensus and common positions rather highlighting differences, too much emphasis on process and not enough on content, and so on. Whether or not one regards such differences in approaches to discussion as gender-based, the differences are real and they can cause problems in seminars. My own view is the following: I think that it is important in seminar discussions to try to sharpen differences, to understand where the real disagreements lie, and to accomplish this is it generally necessary that participants “argue” with each other, in the sense of voicing disagreements and not always seeking consensus. On the other hand, there is no reason why argument, even heated argument, need be marked by aggressiveness, competitiveness, put-downs and the other tricks in the repertoire of male verbal domination. What I hope we can pursue is “cooperative conflict”: theoretical advance comes out of conflict, but hopefully our conflicts can avoid being antagonistic.

8. CHAIRING DISCUSSIONS. In order for the discussions to have the kind of continuity, equity and dynamics mentioned above, it is necessary that the discussion be led by a “strong chair.” That is, the chair has to have the capacity to tell someone to hold off on a point if it seems unrelated to what is being discussed, to tell someone to cut a comment short if an intervention is rambling on and on, and so on. The difficulty, of course, is that such a chair may become heavy-handed and authoritarian, and therefore it is important that seminar participants take responsibility of letting the chair know when too much monitoring is going on.

9. REFLEXIVITY. The success of a seminar is a collective responsibility of all participants. Professors cannot waive magic wands to promote intellectually productive settings. It is essential, therefore, that we treat the process of the seminar itself as something under our collective control, as something which can be challenged and transformed. Issues of competitiveness, male domination, elitism, bullshit, diffuseness, and other problems should be dealt with through open discussion and not left to the end of the seminar. Please let me know if you have concerns of any sort, and it is always appropriate to raise issues with our collective process.