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# Preface

## The Real Utopias Project

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“Real Utopia” seems like a contradiction in terms. Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies. What is needed are hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions. Instead of indulging in utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities.

The Real Utopias Project embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is founded on the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be Pollyanna-ish to say “where there is a will there is a way,” it is certainly true that without “will” many “ways” become impossible. Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a utopian destination may be necessary to motivate people to leave on the journey from the status quo in the first place, even though the actual destination may fall short of the utopian ideal. Yet, vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or worse still, which lead us over some unforeseen abyss. Along with “where there is a will there is a way,” the human struggle for emancipation confronts “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” What we need, then, are “real utopias”: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have pragmatically accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change. These are the goals of the Real Utopias Project.

The Real Utopias Project is an attempt at sustaining and deepening serious discussion of radical alternatives to existing institutions. The objective is to focus on specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of basic social institutions rather than on either vague, abstract formulations of grand designs, or on small reforms of existing practices. In practical terms, the Real Utopias Project consists of a series of workshop conferences, each revolving around a manuscript that lays out the basic outlines of a radical institutional proposal. The essays presented at these conferences are then revised for the books in the Real Utopias Project.

The conference which was the basis for this volume in the Real Utopias Project was held at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin in January 2000. For that conference four people who had done research on empirical cases of innovative forms of participatory democracy in different parts of the world were asked to write papers in which they analyzed their cases in terms an earlier version of the model of empowered participatory governance which appears in revised form as chapter 1 in this book. Other participants at the conference then commented on these cases and on the ideas in the general model.

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# Acknowledgements

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Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, “Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance,” pp. 5–42

Gianpaolo Baiocchi, “Participation, Activism and Politics: the Porto Alegre Experiment and Deliberative Democratic Theory,” pp. 43–72

Archon Fung, “Accountable Autonomy: Toward Empowered Deliberation in Chicago Schools and Policing,” pp. 73–104

Craig Thomas, “Habitat Conservation Planning: Certainly Empowered, Somewhat Deliberative, Questionably Democratic,” pp. 105–30