

*General Outline for papers
for the Envisioning Real Utopias Seminar*

Erik Olin Wright
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In what follows I lay out the basic contours of a possible outline for the seminar papers. Some of this is drawn from the list of “Questions to ask of Real Utopian Proposals”, but I have reorganized these in the form of a paper outline.

I realize that it may be a little rigid to ask everyone to follow the same basic structure for their papers, and I certainly would not impose this if there is a good reason to adopt a different strategy. Nevertheless, I think this will help provide guidance for the issues that need to be addressed, and it might also help facilitate the discussions in the conference at the end of the semester.

1. Introduction: setting the stage

This can be quite short or a much more extended discussion, depending upon the nature of the problem being explored. It should include at least the following:

- *A clear statement of the problem(s) for which the real utopian institutional design is meant to be a solution.* This should be stated right at the outset.
- *Setting the context for the specific proposal/case you will be exploring.* For papers that revolve around a specific empirical case, this should include the historical narrative that tells the story of the case (but not the details of its institutional design) and gives it an historical context. For papers that are not mainly anchored in a specific concrete case but instead explore a theoretical model (eg. Basic income or market socialism or workers cooperatives in general rather than a specific worker co-op), this discussion can chart the theoretical discussions of the idea in question – give some historical context to the discussion rather than to a concrete case.

2. Normative foundations

[This section might work better after the section on institutional design, depending on the character of the analysis. Generally I think it will be helpful to clarify what is the normative goal embodied in the proposal/case/design before laying out the details of the design].

This section should clarify the fundamental values and conception of social justice embodied in the proposal/design that is being discussed. In an historical case study this does *not* have to be exclusively about the goals of the actors themselves within the case (although of course the goals and normative

commitments of the actors matter). The idea here is for you to analyze what values and principles you feel the design in question can help to realize.

3. The Design

This is in many ways the pivotal part of the paper. This involves unpacking how the institution in question – whether a more abstract model or a specific empirical case – actually works: what are the rules that govern its operation; how are resources allocated; how are decisions made and conflicts resolved; who does what; etc. Specifying the design of an institution is an analytically demanding task. It involves distinguishing between unimportant details and fundamental properties. It also involves specifying some issues which are being bracketed even if they might be important for certain purposes. For example, in discussions of unconditional basic income it is important ultimately to resolve the problem of how non-citizens are treated with respect to the basic income, or how children compared to adults are treated. But it would be perfectly reasonable in laying out the design principles of basic income to say that these issues will be set aside.

4. Evaluations

This is a complex part of the paper and should itself be broken down into a number of subsections depending upon what are the pivotal dimensions on which the case under study is to be evaluated. This section should also include a discussion of objections and criticisms of the model or case as these are appropriate under different headings.

The following is a list of possible headings under which the design/proposal/case could be evaluated and analyzed. Not all of these will be relevant for every paper, and of course there may be other headings for the evaluation/analysis of cases as well:

- *Robust sustainability.* Are there internal contradictions within the proposal that make the reproduction of the project difficult over time? Does the dynamic over time of the institution tend to reinforce or undermine its viability? For example, basic income may reduce labor supply to the point that the basic income cannot be financed through taxation.
- *Effectiveness for desired goals.* This is of fundamental importance, of course: how effective is the design for actually accomplishing what it is meant to accomplish (as laid out in section 2). This problem can also be explored through the examination of negative and positive unintended consequences.
- *Negative unintended consequences.* Every institutional innovation has unintended consequences – side effects other than those which are the goals of the innovation. Some of these may be positive, unintended yet desirable effects. But some may be negative. Language policies that subsidize minority languages in the name of cultural diversity may

increase the isolation of a minority culture, reduce social integration, and increase hostility. Central planning in socialist economies, designed to eliminate the “anarchy of production” of the market, may generate all sorts of pathologies of planning irrationality.

- *Positive unintended consequences.* Often with wide-ranging institutional innovations there can be positive effects others than those that motivate the innovation. Basic income, for example, may increase political activism and the arts by providing a wage subsidy for non-commodified activity.
- *Scalability.* Some proposals can be instituted in small scale, local settings, but cannot be scaled up. A worker coop, for example, is certainly much easier in a small taxi cooperative or a farm than in a multinational automotive corporation. Deliberative democracy is easier in a town than in a large nation state. So, for every proposal it is important to think about scale issues.
- *Divisibility.* Can the proposal be partially implemented in ways that would accomplish some of its goals, or is the institutional design basically an all-or-nothing design? Are there critical threshold effects in the implementation of the proposal so that the positive effects only kick in after some threshold is reached? A very small basic income may generate none of the desirable effects of a generous BI, but a modest basic income might. Weak forms of deliberative democracy might still be improvement over purely representative democracy; or, perhaps, weak forms would lose the advantages of representative democracy without the gains of deliberative democracy.
- *Political feasibility.* What kinds of political economic conditions are likely to be needed to institute a particular kind of proposal? Some proposals may be possible without political mobilization: a group of people can self-organize a workers coop. Others require massive collective action: market socialism cannot be instituted from below. Political conditions include such things as: the necessary coalition of social forces for a proposal to be supported, the power of the potential political opposition, the procedural rules in state institutions that might block a proposal, etc.

5. Conclusions

The conclusion can be whatever you feel is the best way to wrap up the exposition of the paper. This can link the agenda of the paper to broader political concerns. It can be a speculative discussion about future prospects. I have no particular views on what would make the best way to pull things together at the end.