The winter meeting of SWS was held in St. Petersburg the first week in February. In my role as ASA president I wanted to attend to give some kind of presentation around my theme of Real Utopias. I thought SWS would be a great opportunity explain the character of the theme and encourage feminist sociologists to be actively engaged in the discussions at the ASA meeting in Denver in the summer.

I arrived on a red eye flight from LA at 7:00 in the morning on Saturday. I had been a speaker at a two day conference in Santa Barbara celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Port Huron Statement, the core Manifesto for the Students for A democratic Society written by Tom Hayden and others in 1962. The only way to combine the two events was to take the red eye after the Santa Barbara meeting concluded on Friday evening.

So, I arrived, went to the hotel, and slept four hours. In the afternoon, I had lunch and hung out with a former student who had just gotten tenure and then walked to the end of the St. Petersburg Pier. The conversation with Meera was interesting, and brought home how tricky it is to really clearly get across the specific agenda of real utopias. We talked about is the ways in which social movements in the struggles connect to the issue of real utopias. What is sometimes hard to nail down is the difference between revealing and decoding the values embedded in the aspirations of movements, or even their vision of what a desirable world should be like, and the problem of the institutional mechanisms and social structures which would characterize such a world. There are two kinds of issues in play here. One concerns the problem of culture. Culture figure prominently in the current forms of oppression, and many movements are involved in challenging those cultural forms. Sexist culture is one of the conditions that sustain gender oppression, but it isn't so helpful for a real utopia analysis to simply affirm that real utopias embody and affirm a nonsexist (and nonracist, nonclassist, nonhomophobic, etc.) culture. Of course this is true, but it doesn't tell us such about the design of institutions that enable and constrain sexist social practices. The other problem is that the practical tasks of many movements is simply countering the effects of oppressions or defending the interests and wellbeing of groups against assaults. Such struggles are crucial, but they may not tell us much an institutional designs for emancipatory alternatives. So, we talked along these lines for a couple of hours, and this helped me focus some of what I need to say when exploring real utopias with sociologists.

The walk to the end of the pier was pleasant. As I walked out, various clusters of women sociologists at the SWS meeting were walking back. Nice encounters. Everyone made me feel very welcomed. At the end of the pier I bumped into Margaret Vitullo, the director of educational outreach from the ASA Executive Office. She was with a couple of other sociologists admiring the pelicans. Fantastic birds. A kid tossed some kind of

prawnish creature to one of the them; the pelican caught it, then dropped it. So I crept up to it and held the critter at arm's length for the pelican to take it again. He looked at me. I looked back and stretched out a bit more dangling the prawn. The bird poked its beak and the thing, sort of took it in its mouth and spat it out. I kept trying until someone said that Pelicans only ate fish, not crustaceans.

Margaret and I have struck up a very comfortable relationship since I was elected, and she has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of my various outreach efforts. She has been especially important in helping organize my visit to Gaulladet University where I will give a talk February 13 and where she taught for a while. This coming week I am getting some sign language instruction so that I can do a greeting at Gaulladet. I asked Margaret what she thought I should say. We discussed alternatives and came up with: "I am honored to come to visit Deaf World." She then showed me the signs. They were beautiful. It is so striking, even for someone completely unfamiliar with ASL, how expressive the communication gestures can be. I am sure I can master this for the talk.

The evening was taken up with the fabled SWS banquet. Quite an exciting party. For me the highlight was an extended shout-out for people who had reached important milestones in life and careers:

- "Who has finished their MA?"
- "Who has taken their comps, and passed?"
- "Who has finished their P-H-D?"
- "Who has gotten their first job?"
- "Who has gotten promoted to tenure?"
- "Who has become a full professor?"
- "Who has submitted an article to a journal?"
- "Who has gotten an article accepted?"
- "Who has a book contract?"
- "Who has retired?"
- "Who has had a baby?"
- "Who has gotten married?"
- "Who has gotten divorced?"
- "Who has had none of these things?"

After each question the relevant group of people who stand up amidst cheers and hoots and applause. When we got to the more pivotal events – especially finishing a PhD, first job, and tenure – the women being celebrated who pump the air Rocky Balboa style accompanied raucous cheering. I was deeply struck by how heartfelt all this was. This sort of thing could be just going through the motions, but it wasn't. The room, filled with around 300 people, was overflowing with love and shared pleasure marking these achievements. I thought of the main contrasting way that achievements are recognized publicly – competitions and prizes for the best book, for example. When people applaud the giving of a prize it is a public recognition, and it reflects the value people place on the achievement, but it is not like this collective affirmation of shared lives and the hope for each person to flourish and realize their life plans.

The other notable thing in the banquet was the SWS silent auction. People brought things to be auctioned at the banquet to raise money for some local women's movement or project. The goal this year was to raise $5000 (which they did). Representatives from the groups that were to get this money gave short presentations about their work. A woman describing the projects of a local group working against domestic violence was especially interesting to me, and useful from the vantage point of the real utopias agenda. She described in some detail two projects – one concerning a battered women's shelter, and the other a violence prevention program in the schools, built around a curriculum – which they called "peacemakers" – designed to give kids from an early age words and strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflicts. She related a specific incident that she felt was symbolic of the aspirations of the project: one of the funders of the organization reported an incident in which her 7 year old daughter stepped into a conflict between two 9 year old cousins and used the techniques she had learned two years earlier in the peacemaker program to calm things down and resolve the conflict. I felt that these two projects – shelters and peacemakers – illustrated the agenda of real utopias: in the alternative world we would like to bring about we will always need something like peacemakers curricula and ways of teaching it effectively to children of different ages in order to sustain a culture of nonviolence and interpersonal peaceful conflict resolution. Building such practice now and figuring out how best to do this is therefore an interstitial real utopia transformation, whereas domestic violence shelters are an institutional device for coping with the problem, not for realizing the alternative.

The evening culminated with energetic dancing . Initially I didn't want to enter the fray. There were only three or four men in the room and somewhere around 300 women – maybe 200 by the time the dancing began. But eventually I joined in and had a good time (even though it was pretty hard on my left knee, alas).

The workshop on Feminism and real utopias took place Sunday morning, 9:00-10:15. Not a lot of time, but they had a very packed schedule. The format was for me to give a 5-10 minute introduction laying out the RU agenda, and then for a number of women to either comment on one or more of the RU proposals that will be presented in Denver and have already been posted on my website, or to present their visions of a real utopia that is not on the agenda for the ASA from their own work. Five such presentations were scheduled, so that made for a pretty tight session.

In my opening remarks I began by talking about the two real utopian moments from the previous evening – the shout-out for milestones (as a contrast to recognition through competitive prizes) and the peacemakers program. I then explained what I now call the foundational empirical claim of any critical sociology and the three tasks that follow from this claim:

- The empirical claim: much human suffering and many deficits in human flourishing are the result of the organization of institutions and social structures. I argued that this should not be seen as a controversial claim; it was fundamentally one of the pillars of sociology. What is controversial is the identification of the precise mechanisms that generate the harms.

- The three tasks: diagnosis and critique; envisioning alternatives; a theory of transformation.

This was followed by a very brief elaboration of what it means to frame the second task in terms of real utopias. I illustrated this with Wikipedia as one example (and explained the Wikipedia initiative and the use of Wikipedia in the classroom), and worker cooperatives as another.

I went a bit over ten minutes, but not much. There then followed two commentaries on the proposal for democratic education written by Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, and three short presentations around movements around violence against women. The two commentaries both pointed out the silence on gender (and race and heteronormativity) in the Fielding/Moss proposal, but did not really make any specific suggestions about what institutional design mechanisms should be added to deal with these issues in an emancipatory way. The three presentations on violence involved some discussion of institutional designs in some empirical settings, but also did not really address the distinctively real utopian dimension of their cases. Still, I felt that the expositions were interesting and thoughtful, and overall the session did help to sharpen the agenda.

At the end I was asked for some final thoughts, following a few interventions from the floor. I encouraged everyone to be active participants in the sessions at the ASA and then said the following: "There will be 21 sessions built around specific proposals. Two of these directly involve gender issues – one by Judith Lorber, Barbara Risman and Jessica Sherwood, and a second by Janet Gornick, exploring the problem of the family division of labor. But gender issues, of course, will be important in many of the other topics as well. I hope many of read the proposals that interest you and then leave comments on the ASA website where the proposals will be posted, and then come to the session to raise these issues. What I especially encourage you to do is not simply point out that a proposal has been inattentive to gender issues, but to positively suggest how paying attention to gender will change something in the institutional design that is proposed. And it could happen, in some of the proposals, that even if the proposal did not pay attention to gender that doing so would not change the institutional design. Gender may just not matter that much in some cases."

Afterwards a number of women came up to object to this final comment. I tried to explain that while gender is always relevant to the analysis it is not necessarily the case that the institutional design for a specific real utopia problem will have any distinctive gendered elements. This didn't go down well. I got a mini-lecture by one person about how important it was for the mainstream to take feminism seriously and always bring out the gender dimensions of a problem. Things were a bit rushed at that point, but I couldn't quite get across the idea that taking gender seriously does not prejudge the outcome of an analysis in terms of how significant it turns out to be for the solution of some problem. I think this is an issue that I need to fold into the presidential address I gave, and I need to say it in a way that is well heard by people.

Here is an email I received after the meeting on this issue:

I thought the session went very well until the end. The part I think was really useful were the two critiques of the proposal. Hopefully they'll go on the site, and perhaps the authors will dialogue and even hear the criticisms and perhaps improve the paper…

At the end, the very end, I'm afraid you really put your foot into mouth…. We all think everything is gendered (as well as "raced" and about class). So the remark that urban transportation had no gendered implications was perceived to indicate that you didn't "get it"…. Just so you know….

But I think there will be very nice unintended consequences….an engaged, pissed off feminist community might get us more people reading and responding to the proposals, and even offering their own. So, ironically, I think it's a good thing…

And my response:

About my final "foot in the mouth" remarks in my presentation, what I meant to say is that even if existing public transportation is gendered in all sorts of ways -- I surely agree with that -- it does not follow that there is a distinctive gender dimension to the institutional design of an ideal public transportation system. It cannot be axiomatic that the ideal design of every institution will have some specific gendered-institutional-design-principle. I say the same thing about class. Even though all existing institutions are permeated by class inequalities, it doesn't follow that the real utopia institutional design around every issue will have a distinctive class dimension. The reason is that if there is a solution to class inequalities in the core institutional contexts where class is formed, then in other institutional contexts the ideal designs may not require any additional class-specific institutional features. In the gender case, if we construct the model of gender-egalitarian (or post-gender or degendered...whatever) schooling, family support institutions, employment relations, health institutions, education, and perhaps a few other core institutional sites, it could be that there would not be any specific gender-relevant design features for ideal public transportation. My only point is that this needs to be treated as an open question, not something we know axiomatically in advance of studying the problem and making the relevant theoretical arguments.

But the main thing, I think, is the idea that I hope people do not mainly criticize the proposals by simply pointing out that they sideline gender, but rather make positive arguments about what it means to specify institutional principles in a way that includes gender-emancipatory elements. In the two criticisms of the education proposal there wasn't much that did that -- that actually said how a gender-emancipatory democratic egalitarian school system would differ in its design principles from the one outlined in the proposal.

Anyway, it will all be interesting and I hope constructive for feminist perspectives to vigorously be part of the discussion.