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Barry Seidman interview with Takis Fotopoulos*

On the multi-dimensional crisis

Barry: Welcome Takis Fotopoulos to Equal Time for Free Thought. You begin your book and indeed your analysis of the effects of the growth economy on society by calling attention to the multidimensional crisis. Can you give us a brief overview of what this crisis looks like in our everyday lives and how we got to be in such a predicament in the first place?

Takis: I think few people today dispute the fact that society is going through a multidimensional crisis, which extends to the political, the economic, the social, the cultural and of course the ecological level and, which, in fact, is also a universal crisis not only in the geographical sense because the institutions of modernity –I mean the system of market economy and representative democracy– are now universal, but also in the sense of its scope. That is, not only the structures of the present system are now questioned by many people, but also the values themselves, particularly the value of Progress, with respect to the ecological crisis. I think we can trace the causes of this crisis to the concentration of power at all levels, which has been created by the system of market economy and representative democracy.

So, we first have a crisis in politics, a crisis that has started since the end of the 18th century when the Founding Fathers of the US constitution literally invented representative democracy, because up to then the prevailing meaning of democracy was the classical meaning, I mean the direct exercise of power by people themselves. And then, if we go briefly through the various phases of modernity, we can see how the dynamics instituted by representative democracy led to more and more concentration of power. We have, first, concentration of power in the hands of parliamentarians, then, during the statist phase of democracy, we have concentration of power in governments and the leadership of mass parties, and then, today, we have the development of what we may call *statecraft*, in other words, we have parties changing or replacing each other after elections, every four or five years, parties which are indistinguishable as regards their political programs and which are no longer mass parties. At the same time, we have huge and rising abstention rates all over the developed capitalist world, respect for politicians is almost nil, apathy with respect to what passes as politics is growing –although this does not mean apathy in general with respect to politics, as this is shown by Seattle, then Genoa, then today in Argentina, Venezuela and so on.

As regards the economic crisis, again, as a result of the globalization process, we have a growing inequality not only between North and South but within North and South as well...

Barry: When you refer to North and South you mean hemispheres?

Takis: Yeah, what I think we have at the moment is the creation of a bipolar world, in other words, one world, which includes the privileged by globalization social groups, which can be found both in the North and the South, and at the same time we have the creation of another world, which is left out of the supposedly universal benefits of globalization. (So, there is) a growing gap which is shown by all kinds of statistics; to give you just one example one per cent (1%) of the world's population earning eighty per cent (80%) of world income, ten per cent (10%) owning eighty five percent (85%) of world wealth and so on. And, in fact, this growing gap is not just a consequence of the present system, but also a precondition for its reproduction because, actually, there are no natural resources for the system to reproduce the standard of living or the standard of consumption, achieved at the moment in the United States or Western Europe all over the world .

Then, we have a social crisis, because the growth economy —which is an offspring of the market economy— had created a growth society, with consumerism, privacy, alienation, disintegration of social ties and so on having created a non-society, where families take the place of society. A symptom of this (social crisis) is the explosion of crime. In the United States of America it took two hundred years to raise its prison population to a million, but in the last ten years it was doubled, and this creates insecurity not only in lower social groups, but also in upper social groups where we have luxury ghettos which complement the misery ghettos and so on.

Then, we have a cultural crisis which is a direct product of globalization. We have a cultural homogenization —which has created a backlash in terms of cultural nationalism— and this is again a result of the liberalization and deregulation and commercialization of culture, all of these being byproducts of globalization.

And then, of course, we have the ecological crisis, which has become now front page news, with the greenhouse effect and the climate change threatening life itself within the next fifty, or at most one hundred years: disappearance of species, deforestation, pollution and so on. Again, this can be shown that it is directly related to the system of the market economy and its offspring the growth economy. It can be shown, in other words, how, for example as regards the greenhouse effect, the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased almost geometrically since the industrial revolution. The cumulative effect is much higher now than in the entire history of human beings.

So, we can see that we have a multidimensional crisis which, in fact, can be traced to the concentration of power that has been created by the institutions of modernity.

On “actually existing socialism”

Barry: That's a good overview of the multidimensional crisis. Before we talk about the sort of political or economic system Americans may be most familiar with, the ongoing debate between neoliberal and welfare state markets, you made clear in your work your thoughts on, what is called 'actually existing socialism in the former USSR, China, today's Cuba. Could not socialism, if re-worked to be more democratic than in these countries, for instance, get us out of this crisis?

Takis: No, I don't think so, because the problem with actually existing socialism is that, from the beginning, it was based on a theory or an ideology of the vanguard of the party, which was supposed to play a hegemonic role, or a leading role in determining events. The soviets have been, in fact, replaced by the monopoly of power of the Party very early on. There are of course objective conditions that could explain this —the encirclement by the West and the (Second World) war, the cold war going later on and so on— but I think these

are not enough to explain the distortions of the democratic process, which was supposed to be created by the soviet system. I think that it was the ideology itself that created a kind of –if not authoritarian– a kind of non-democratic structure, in the sense that power was, again, concentrated in the hands of elites. In the same way that, in the Western system, we have power concentrated in the hands of capitalist elites and the elites of parliamentarians, in the soviet system, we have concentration of power in the hands of the soviet elites, the bureaucrats and the technocrats. So, I don't think that this system either could secure political democracy. Perhaps, it was better than the Western system in terms of securing the satisfaction of basic needs of all citizens and, in fact, there are Western studies confirming that –at the same level of development– the Soviet Union has achieved a higher satisfaction of basic needs than the Western system, but, at the political level, I don't think that there were any significant steps toward a kind of democracy, like the one we are discussing.

On social democracy

Barry: Ok. Many liberals and even progressives in the United States here might argue that for a while, from just before WWII through the early 1970s, here and in parts of Europe like Scandinavia or Western Europe, a good balance was struck between the capitalist economy and human welfare, with Roosevelt's New Deal, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and with, like I said, the efforts of, say, Scandinavia. What do you attribute to the rolling back of the social welfare state in America and Europe and why are you arguing we not return to those pre-Ronald Reagan and pre-Margaret Thatcher conditions?

Takis: The reason is that –and on this I disagree profoundly with the reformist Left analysis that this is just a matter of the failure of the Left, or the failure of social democratic parties, or of the treason of social democratic leaderships and so on, I don't think that these are adequate explanations– I think that we can explain why social democracy has in effect died since the rise of neoliberal globalization, if we see the economic processes that were going on. Although I do not want to adopt a kind of economic type of approach, because, in my analysis, the social outcome every time depends on the interaction between objective conditions, (that is, in this case, economic events) and subjective conditions, (that is the outcome of the social struggle), what happened was that, as soon as the economy started being internationalized –or globalized according to others– that meant that markets had to be liberated, had to be opened, and that meant in turn that statism, in the form we have known it in the 50s and in the 60s, became impossible. It became impossible, because opened and liberated, unregulated markets meant that capital was free to move from country to country to find out where the most profitable conditions of production were available. Obviously, if you have a country like Sweden or Britain, where tax rates in the 50s and the 60s as regards corporation taxes, or other direct taxes like personal income tax, were high for high-income groups, then this meant an increase in the cost of production for multinationals, which would prefer a country like India or China that offers conditions of investment without a high cost in terms of tax rates, or even in terms of social insurance contributions for employees and so on. So, as soon as the economy became internationalized, statism, in the form that we knew it, was dead. Governments that tried actually to oppose this trend –and there were attempts, like (those of) president Mitterand in France or (of Oscar) Lafontaine, who was finance secretary to the Chancellor Schroeder in Germany and so on, to reverse this neoliberal trend– had to reverse their policies when

they found out that immediately (after) they began implementing any effective restrictions on capital (in terms of high tax rates etc.), they were either threatened by the movement of capital abroad, or a crisis in their currency, or a crisis in their stock exchanges and so on, and they had to change policies. So, that's why, today, it's impossible to have the kind of social democracy we had in the 50s and the 60s.

On the meaning of democracy

Barry: Speaking of democracy, this leads me to ask you how you define democracy. As you know –and as many Americans don't understand– our Founding Fathers were hesitant to call what they were creating with the colonies, a “democracy”, calling the United States, instead, a “republic”. First, what is democracy, if not what we have in America, or where you are today in England?

Takis: As I said before, the classical meaning of democracy was the direct exercise of political power by the people. This was a tradition that started with the classical Athenian example and continued later on in the Middle Ages with some cities in Europe, and then we see the same trend coming back every time we had any kind of revolutionary or insurrectionary process. That means that it is the people themselves who, through face-to-face assemblies, take all important political decisions. This was the initial conception of democracy, which presupposed of course a certain degree of decentralization. That's why it was possible in classical Athens, where something like 30,000 people were taking part in assemblies once or twice a month, but it was also possible in the French revolution, in the 1790s (Parisian) sections where neighborhoods were concentrating in neighborhood assemblies, they were assembling there, and having their meetings. You could imagine a system where these assemblies are federating in regional assemblies and then in confederal assemblies and so on. So, it has been done in the past, and this was actually the original idea because there is no democracy if your will is not expressed directly. That is, you can perhaps delegate your will, you can appoint a delegate to express your wish on particular issues, but nobody can express your own will. When you elect a representative, you simply give power to somebody else to take decisions for you, within a period of four years, without asking you on any important issues that he or she takes decisions –that's what a representative democracy means. In fact, there is a very good study by (Ellen) Wood, an American writer, who shows how the representative democracy that was introduced by the Founding Fathers was not introduced because they thought that the population sizes were so big so that it was impossible to have direct democracy, but, on the contrary, it was introduced –and explicitly was stated so– because they thought that it could not be left to the masses to decide everything and that what was needed, in other words, was to create such a system so that it is the elites –although they may have not used this term– which take decisions actually on important issues. So, the idea of direct democracy is one that is coming back, again and again, up to May '68 of course, and up to today : in every kind of insurrection we have in Latin America, Venezuela, Argentina and so on, you would see people meeting in general assemblies and taking decisions directly.

Barry: Is there a possible role for something called the state? Maybe a less hierarchical government in a direct democracy, or is that completely impossible—an oxymoron?

Takis: In what sense?

Barry: For instance, you're not correlating the kind of confederations and assemblies to a hierarchical kind of government, what we used to have in an official state where we have a top down hierarchy, so I'm assuming (that) in a direct democracy, where you eliminate a top down hierarchy, you don't really have anything that anyone would recognize as a state anymore...

Takis: This is the whole idea, i.e. today we have what we may call a statist democracy in the sense that it presupposes what many people in the literature call separation of polity from society. Today, in other words, society is not polity itself, whereas in a direct democracy, society and polity are integrated — they are one. So, in this sense, direct democracy is a stateless democracy, that is, it's not a "rule", as some libertarians call direct democracy. It's not a rule, because a rule presupposes that there is a minority, which separates itself from society and takes decisions. But, when everybody takes part in the decision-taking process, sets the laws and agrees, or not, with the laws suggested by other people taking part in the assembly, then, in fact there is no rule any more. In fact, there is no separation of society from polity. So I can't see how you can have any kind of democracy co-existing with the state, because in this case we don't have any more an integrated society with polity, we have two different systems.

On the meaning of Inclusive Democracy

Barry: Ok. All this adds up to what you have called inclusive democracy. Sound bites are not what our show is all about, but if someone asks you to define inclusive democracy in seventy-five words or less, what would you say?

Takis: I would say inclusive democracy is the authority of **demos**, and by demos I mean the civil body in a particular area, it may be a town or maybe several communities and so on. So, it is the authority of demos over the political decision-taking process, the economic decision-taking process and generally over any kind of decisions that can be taken collectively. This is why I defined the constituents, the main elements of inclusive democracy, as the following ones :

- political or direct democracy, which refers to the institutions institutionalizing direct political decision-taking by the assemblies;
- economic democracy, which means that it is again (demotic) assemblies that take all important (economic) decisions;
- democracy in the social realm, which means in effect self-management in education, in work and so on, where workplace assemblies define the way in which work should be done in workshops, factories and offices; and, finally,
- ecological democracy, which means the reintegration of society with Nature.

In other words, to sum it up, inclusive democracy is the reintegration of society with polity, the economy and Nature.

On Economic Democracy and how it works

Barry: So, let's do a thought experiment. In some future society we have eliminated free market capitalism, market socialism such as social democracy, and the hierarchical

state. What was formerly known as the United States of America is now an inclusive democracy. What would we see? For instance, have we returned to several thousand little communities, as primitivists argue for? Could we really operate without presidents, governors, and mayors?

Takis: What we can imagine is that, first of all, we need a radical decentralization, that is, you cannot have a direct democracy, or an inclusive democracy for that purpose, in a country the size of the United States, unless you have radical decentralization. Radical decentralization does not mean physical decentralization, it can be an administrative decentralization, and this can be done, and it has been done in the past. In fact, decentralization is today necessary if we want to take any effective measures to deal with the ecological crisis —apart from the fact that decentralization would create again the social ties which have been destroyed by the present market society. So, once you have decentralization and you have divided a country like the United States into units of, say, 50,000 people in each unit, each *demos*, then each *demos* will have its own demotic assembly which would take all basic political and economic decisions —I'll explain in a moment what I mean by economic decisions— and, given that there are of course many problems which could not be solved at the local level, there are regional problems —for example, electricity and so on— or there may be confederal problems, which refer to the entire United States, or even to the entire world...

Barry: I was gonna question somewhere in this program on how to deal with the space program or the global warming or health care.

Takis: ... we can have, therefore, confederations of *demos*, which would deal with the problems that cannot be sorted out at the local level, and, regional and confederal assemblies for regional and confederal problems (respectively). Then, as regards the economic in particular arrangements, what we suggest in the inclusive democracy project is not to leave everything to planning mechanisms, as is usually the case in various socialist models, but, instead, to combine a kind of artificial market with the planning mechanism. That's why we make the crucial distinction between basic needs and non-basic needs.

Barry: Ok, before you go a little bit further into that, which I want to hear about, you just said artificial markets, and I've been discussing with a friend of mine, how market abolitionists argue that the marketization process —and you argue this in your book as well— is the key problem, the key economic reason we are in the multidimensional crisis to begin with. What do you exactly mean by artificial markets? How (are they) different than (actual-existing) markets?

Takis: What I mean is that this market will not presuppose a monetary system —neither a state, of course— therefore what it means, in effect, is that we have a market that creates a sort of artificial prices, so that the allocation of resources takes place. This works through a voucher system, as we propose, but in fact, with modern technology, it could work also with a special credit card, that is, credit cards could play exactly the same role as vouchers. So, to come back to the distinction I made between basic and non-basic needs, as regards basic needs, the principle applying on the satisfaction of basic needs, we think, has to be the old communist principle, “from each according to his ability to each according to her need” because no freedom of choice can be achieved without the satisfaction of basic needs for all citizens.

Barry: What do you mean about basic needs?

Takis: Basic needs is something that would be defined by demotic assemblies: which are the basic needs, and even what is the entitlement of each citizen for basic needs. I would imagine, however, that assemblies would determine that basic needs are not just the survival needs, that is, food, clothing, housing, and so on, but also the main needs that today have become basic for modern society, like communication needs, travel needs – apart of course from health, education and so on (the welfare needs).

Barry: Will the people have a say in determining what the basic needs are?

Takis: Yeah, but not through the demotic assembly; what we suggest is that to get homogeneity in the covering of basic needs in a country, say, like the USA, it's the confederal assembly that would determine which are the basic needs and the entitlement of each citizen so that these basic needs could be met. Then, however, we introduce the element of freedom of choice, (the lack of) which is a basic drawback of usual planning models that, in fact, do not secure freedom of choice when they say "you have to predict a year in advance what will be your consumption" etc. That's why we have this system of vouchers or credit cards, where you can use your basic vouchers to decide which are the *satisfiers*, that is, the means of satisfying the basic needs. So, you don't have a voucher saying that you have to use "clothes" from the state monopoly, because this creates all the problems that have been created in the Soviet Union, but, instead, you can choose from any collective that produces clothes, using your basic vouchers to buy from them. This way, you secure freedom of choice and, at the same time, you cover the basic needs.

As regards the non-basic needs now, there, you could apply the principle of meeting the non-basic needs on the basis of effort rather than on the basis of need, which we have described before...

Barry: In the confederations there are, as I understand, several of these confederate level groups of people along the size of the current United States, so that there would be more than a very small amount, more than a concentrated amount of people, making these kinds of decisions of what basic needs are and what non-basic needs are and what should be the choices?

Takis: Yeah, this is the idea, because otherwise, through the confederal assemblies, you may create new kinds of hierarchies, so to avoid this, what we propose is that both regional assemblies and confederal assemblies should consist of recallable delegates, that is, it is the demotic assemblies, at the base level, which (effectively, though not formally) will take the decisions about what is a basic need, and then these decisions will be conveyed through their delegates to regional assemblies and then, through the regional delegates, to the confederal assemblies. So, in effect, it is the majorities that had been created de facto in demotic assemblies, which would determine at the confederal level which are the basic needs and how we satisfy them. And, in fact, the demotic assemblies have, as I said, the power to recall any delegate who is not going to implement the decisions of the demotic level.

Barry: A lot of people come to me and say they're appalled and bewildered when I tell them that this is a society without money, without a form of currency. Are vouchers

another kind of money or currency?

Takis: No, that's why we suggest a system of vouchers rather than money itself, because money has in fact three basic functions: it is a medium of exchange of course, but it is also a store of wealth, and a unit of account. Now, we want to abolish the function of money as a store of wealth and that's why vouchers are personal vouchers, that is they are issued for each person, on the basis of his/her own basic needs. Or, if they work more than the basic number of hours, then, they are entitled to non-basic vouchers, and as I said, this could also be done through a credit card system. Now, we want to abolish money, exactly in order not to (allow it) to play the role of store of wealth. This is because, if you say that these vouchers are issued in terms of normal money, then some people may be saving more, or other people may not be —for any reason— using all their vouchers and so on. So, this way, you have some sort of accumulation of wealth building up and this accumulation of wealth could easily create, in the future, pressures for the restoration of a proper market rather than the artificial market we are talking about. That's why we are talking about personal vouchers.

Barry: On the larger scale, in producing products and goods and things we need (food, etc.), how does in an inclusive democracy goods get distributed?

Takis: You mean how you could achieve some sort of equal satisfaction between very different regions? Is that...?

Barry: Well yeah, because obviously not every single community, or group of people, have the resources and the ability at hand to create all the stuff they need and not only will these natural resources have to be distributed from one area of the country to another, but also from one part of the world to another. So how does this happen in your system?

Takis: Of course, there is a high diversity in the distribution of natural resources, especially in a country like the USA. So, that's why we propose that the confederal assemblies will take care —when they decide the resources available in the confederation— of these diversities. In fact, they will take explicit action to distribute equally the benefits from the natural resources in various areas, because, otherwise, you cannot talk about individual and social autonomy being achieved by all members of the confederation but, instead, you're talking about another jungle being created, with rich areas becoming even wealthier and poor areas becoming perhaps even poorer than before! So, it is within the duties of the confederal assembly to redistribute the benefits of natural advantages equally among all members. Actually, this is being done, or is supposed to be done, even today, within, for example, the European Union, that is, they're supposed to be trying to redistribute the benefits (arising out) of the inequality (in the distribution) of natural resources between various countries in Europe, through subsidies and so on. So, I suppose, if even in a capitalist union like the European Union, at least they're supposed to be doing this, then it could be done even more so in a confederal Inclusive Democracy!

Barry: Ok. A co-producer of mine asked me this question about inclusive democracy. He said what about the innovation capitalist markets seem to produce, as far as new products or scientific advances and new technologies are concerned? What would be our incentive to produce anything other than what some community thinks it needs, so that

we don't stall progress, and of course –clarifying progress– I mean ecologically safe progress?

Takis: Yeah, good question. First of all, we have to understand that the aims of the system that I described do not include growth as such, in other words, we are supposed to move away from a growth economy, because this is anyway the only way we can create a sustainable society today, I mean an ecologically sustainable society. So, that's why we argue that the basic aim is to meet the basic needs of all people, as well as the non-basic needs of people who are willing to offer more effort, so that they can satisfy better their basic needs, or other needs. That means that, although growth is out, still, there may be necessary to have some sort of (occasional) growth, if for example, we need more investment in order to produce something more economically, or perhaps in a way that satisfies better human needs. This is something that could be done, through the assembly system, and nobody argues that in a confederal Inclusive Democracy there will be no experts, who will be trying to devise new methods of production and so on. That is, the difference with present capitalist society, is that, today, it is capitalist corporations which decide, on the basis of their own motives –the profit motive and so on– which new techniques and new technologies will be adopted or not, whereas in a confederal inclusive democracy, experts, again, could suggest new methods of production and I can see no reason why assemblies will not decide for the introduction of a new invention or a new way of producing, as long of course, as you said, this does not create a serious ecological problem.

Barry: Right. What about information? How does information spread in an inclusive democracy : radio, internet, books? I'm assuming it's similar, but I was just curious because it's sort of an intangible.

Takis: It is supposed that mass media, and means of communication in general, are controlled again by the (demotic) assemblies on the one hand, and on the other, the people working in the mass media enterprises –if you like to call them like this. In other words, on the one hand, the demotic assemblies, or the regional, or confederal assemblies we were talking about, will take the general guideline decisions about what sort of policies, say, a (demotic/regional/confederal respectively) TV channel will favor –for example, not to produce pornographic programs or whatever– and the mass media people, the people working in the mass media, would decide what sort of programs they will produce in detail, that is whether they are going to have scientific programs, or entertainment programs, or whatever. This will be decided at the level of the mass media, but within the general guidelines set by the assemblies.

Barry: The assemblies and the confederations and everything in between we're talking about, all this, I suppose, (involves) people on a general level, of the demos etc., but is there a separate set of assemblies, for instance, within what is now corporations, which involve large groups of people producing specific things like on the job assemblies? Are they connected directly with general assemblies or are they separate assemblies for people working in?

Takis: Yeah, apart from the demotic assemblies, where people take part as citizens and express the general interest –and of course the same applies to regional and confederal assemblies– there are also workplace assemblies, which are based in each workplace, either

it is a factory, or an office, or an educational institution and so on. These workplace assemblies take all the decisions for the day- to- day running of the workplace, as well as decisions about how to divide the tasks of production, on the basis, first, of the instructions given by the confederal assembly about the production of basic goods and, second, on the basis of the demand they have for their products, which is revealed by the voucher system. So, again, as with mass media, it is the confederal assembly that would give instructions as regards the targets for covering the basic needs, but as regards the non-basic needs, it is consumers themselves who decide what each individual enterprise will produce and then it is the workplace assembly that will take all the decisions about the running of the factory, etc.

On Human Nature

Barry: Ok. Just two more questions, on this level...sort of philosophical questions. I'm gonna play devil's advocate here, because I don't necessarily believe what I'm about to read, but I have a question that some people do ask me. What about human nature? Some people here in the United States, some of my friends in fact, would ask how would such a cooperative egalitarian society function with such greedy selfish warlike creatures that human beings are running the show?

Takis: I think this is in fact an ideology, that is, the attempt to explain human society on the basis of what human nature is, or how human nature has developed today, is not irrelevant to the institutional framework that developed in the last two hundred years. In other words, it is the value systems that prevailed since the emergence of the system of the market economy two hundred years ago –the individualistic values, the competitive values and so on, which are parts of the liberal ideology– it is this value system that can explain such ideas as that “human nature is individualistic” and so on. There is no scientific evidence to show this, and, in fact, I don't think that we are born either to be individualistic, competitive and so on –as some liberal philosophers argue– or, alternatively, that we are born to be co-operative, living in solidarity and behaving in a mutual aid fashion and so on –(as some libertarian philosophers do). I think all these (behaviours) are determined later on, through the socialization process, that is, from day one that we are born, we are socialized to adopt certain values by family, school, mass media, etc. So, all these ideas about human nature being this or that, I think, simply reflect the institutional framework of society.

On Religion and Fundamentalism

Barry: America, and much of the world outside of Europe, is still pretty religious –from New Age spirituality to Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. Such powerful cultural coping mechanisms and supernaturalistic explanations of reality skew what we know and what we do. How will Inclusive Democracy work under these, or through these, circumstances?

Takis: A basic condition, or precondition, I would say for democracy, and I mean genuine democracy like Inclusive Democracy, is that people take decisions and make their own laws, and society itself makes its own laws, and recognizes itself as a source of these laws. That means that irrationalisms of various kinds, like the ones you mentioned, cannot be the

basis for a democratic or genuine democratic society. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that some individual citizens may be religious, but no democratic society could survive if people try to bring these values, the religious values, into the decision-taking process, because then we're not going to have a democracy anymore —it would not be our own laws that we vote for, but, instead, the laws that are written in the Koran or the Bible, or whatever. So, all these sorts of irrationalisms, by definition, are excluded by an Inclusive Democracy, in the sense that no democracy could be based on religion, or any other kind of irrationalism, although, as I said, at the individual level, this does not exclude the possibility that some people may still believe in God or whatever. But, once they take part in the assemblies, they have to accept the basic democratic principle that **it is we here** that we take our own decisions, vote for our own laws, define our own truth, if you like, and we do not take (for granted) any externally given truths.

Barry: Well, obviously, in a representative democracy like here in the United States, where there are supposed to be constitutional laws separating church and state, if you no longer have organized churches necessarily being able to influence power because that would be authoritarian —or (of course) the state influencing power— and you have just the demos... I'm just wondering how feasible it would be not to assume that large groups of people who consider themselves religious, say Islamic or Christian fundamentalists —and there are plenty of them to go around— wouldn't as a group try to influence the demos, based on this external truth, and how would an inclusive democracy prevent that?

Takis: (Yeah,) but here we do a big jump! That is, if you try to establish tomorrow an inclusive democracy in the United States, or in Iran, obviously this will be impossible. Clearly, there is a transitional process that we have to go through and during this transitional process you could expect that people would create a different kind of consciousness for a different kind of society and —actually this is a basic element of the transitional strategy we suggest within this project— we want to achieve this kind of society by trying, first, to educate people and, second and more important, by creating institutions within the present society which prefigure the inclusive democracy. It is in other words the interaction of education and practice that would lead to this new kind of society. So, you could expect, and this is what we require actually, that this kind of democratic consciousness should have become hegemonic **before** society changes into an inclusive democracy. This was, I would say, the basic flaw of the socialist strategy, the Leninist strategy and so on, that is, that they tried first to conquer power, and then, from above, to create a new consciousness. I think that, unless the democratic consciousness has become hegemonic **before** we reach the new kind of society, this (strategy) is going to fail, as it failed in the Soviet Union and so on. So, we expect that at least the majority (of the population), by the time we have (reached) an inclusive democracy, will not be fundamentalist, or religious like you described it, otherwise...

Barry: Right. We can also make the argument, as others on this show have, that a good reason that there is so much a re-awakening of fundamentalist religiosity —and obviously in the Middle East and the United States— is, because of the multidimensional crisis leading people towards more radical forms of religion.

Takis: This is true, this is how you can explain why, for example, the Arab populations have become fundamentalist today. This was not always so. Twenty or thirty years ago, you had Arab nationalism, you had Arab socialism, but not fundamentalism. So, it is part of the

multidimensional crisis that you had this shift to religious fundamentalism, and, of course, when we are talking about moving to an inclusive democracy we are talking, also, in terms of getting out of this multidimensional crisis, we see inclusive democracy not just as a utopia, but, also, as a way of getting out of this multidimensional crisis.

On the transitional strategy

Barry: Well, that was my last question, how do we get from here to there? What are some steps that we could, the demos, take to get from here to there? You mentioned education and turning back the multidimensional crisis, but actually can you lay out for us some cases by reference to social examples, political or economic examples? What's the strategy leading from here to there?

Takis: I think that the strategy leading to an inclusive democracy should basically aim three important or fundamental aims, that is, to create:

- first, a rupturing of the socialization process, so that a new social paradigm for a genuine inclusive democracy becomes hegemonic, as I mentioned before;
- second, a gradual involvement of increasing numbers of people in a new kind of politics where, in a new kind of organization, they would implement the principles and the values of an inclusive democracy; and
- third, a parallel shifting of economic resources from the market economy, through the creation of the new institutions I mentioned, which, in fact, are new popular bases of political and economic power.

Barry: What of some examples of those political and economic shadow societies, so to speak?

Takis: First of all, such experiments are already at work both in Europe and I think in the United States as well. That is, there are various experiments to create new institutions at the economic level. In Britain there are the LETS Schemes which try to abolish money and create direct exchange (barter) to help unemployed people. Then, there are of course co-ops, workers collectives in various places, eco-villages in Australia and so on. All these (experiments) are in fact (a kind of) prefiguring of a future society. The problem with all these experiments, however, is that they are not integral parts of a new anti-systemic movement, i.e. of a new movement to replace the present system of market economy and representative democracy. They are just individual examples of groups of people in various parts of the world trying, through example, to create the consciousness needed to move to a different society—(a strategy) which, I think, is doomed to failure. There has to be, in other words, a political project. There has to be an analysis of the present situation, the envisioning of the kind of society we want to build, and the strategy to move from here to there. All these groups, in fact, do not satisfy these conditions, and that's why usually they are marginalized or they're even being used by the system itself, so that they could replace the lack of welfare services through these kinds of services from below. So, this is one way. Another way that we suggest, is contesting local elections, which is not only an educational exercise, but also could give us the chance to begin changing society from below, here and now, rather than waiting to change society from above, after the conquest of state power and so on.

Barry: Yeah, but would it be consistent, what would go into contesting a local election? What would someone be doing?

Takis: Yeah, actually some libertarians do criticize us for taking part in local elections, in the sense that this way we may recognize state institutions and so on. In fact, however, there are many references, even to classical anarchists like Bakunin, who thinks that local elections are a completely different kind of elections than state elections, in the sense that there are direct ties between citizens and councilors. So, the question is how —when you are contesting the elections and you gain power in a particular local area— you can create institutions of direct democracy, I mean (political institutions) like neighborhood assemblies, and economic institutions like cooperatives, demotic enterprises and so on. How you create such institutions, which in fact replace the present representative institutions, and you don't make them just formalities; that is, the essence of political and economic power could be moved to people themselves, directly, once you gain power in some particular areas. But, even if you don't gain power, again, there is the educational advantage that you can create contact and appeal to many more people than by trying to achieve the same through individual example in your neighborhood and so on.

Barry: One final question. The multidimensional crisis that we're trying to alleviate through inclusive democracy that will bring us to a more truly liberatory society and concerning the sense of urgency, do you think politically and economically and the way globalization has taken the world right now that there is a timeline we have and that, if we go too much further past that, we'll get to a point of no return? Do you think you know this is...

Takis: Yeah, the latest studies show, in fact, that the ecological crisis is accelerating and scientists are surprised that we move faster than they thought towards...

Barry: Ecologically, but politically and economically?

Takis: Yes, as regards the other aspects of the crisis, the economic crisis, again, is there, in the sense of the bipolar world I mentioned. That is, at the moment, in China say, people work like slaves because they believe they could all have their own car and their own villa, if not a swimming pool and so on, but once they see in the near future that this is impossible and, at the same time, the gap between the privileged social groups and the rest is growing —as it is at the moment— then the present social unrest will become more and more serious. The same thing happens also to some extent in the developed world, that is, you have heard about the present crisis in the USA, in terms of the credit crisis created by mortgage lending, and the same problem has risen in Britain as well. These are just symptoms of the fact that this is a system which is fundamentally unstable. I do not want to say that this system will fall **by itself** because of these crises. Whatever the degree of seriousness of these crises is at the moment, or will become in the future, nothing will happen leading to an Inclusive Democracy. I don't say this. You may perfectly have (instead) the development of an eco-fascist society, or any kind of authoritarian society. At the moment, we are moving towards authoritarian societies, through the war against so-called terrorism, we are moving towards the abolition of basic human liberties and so on. So, in effect, all this greater authoritarianization of society simply means that these crises, the various crises I mentioned, become more and more serious. But, what will happen in the end will depend, of course, on how people will react to these developments. If they

passively accept everything, as at the moment many people seem to do, then, of course, nothing will happen; but if they start reacting, then, you may see all sorts of new movements, like the Inclusive Democracy movement developing.

Barry: I certainly hope so, and maybe Europe will be the place to start this off because in the United States people seem to be so engrained in their rugged individualistic, strongly competitive mindset that it's hard to imagine that they can get it going from here to there, right now, in this country. Thank you Takis Fotopoulos for joining us on Equal Time for Free Thought.

Takis: Ok. It was a pleasure, thank you.

* This is a slightly edited (for purposes of publication) version of the interview with subtitles and explanatory words added, missing words replaced, and repetitions deleted. The interview was aired on 30 December 2007 and can be heard [here](#) or here Equal Time for Freethought [[show 247](#): Takis Fotopoulos, Dec 30th 2007].