

Is the eco-village movement a solution or part of the problem?

TAKIS FOTOPOULOS

Ted's useful new intervention on the issue of the eco-village movement, following the earlier exhaustive examination of the paradigmatic and strategic differences between his 'Simpler Way' and 'Inclusive Democracy',^[1] provides a good opportunity to summarise this debate and cover any further points that have arisen in the meantime.

In the first part of his reply Ted makes clear, once again, the paradigmatic differences between the two theses (despite the fact that he himself does not see any significant contradictions), which leads to his discussion of the significant strategic differences in the second part. Starting from the premise that "there is no possibility of technical fix strategies cutting resource use sufficiently to solve the problems while anything like a consumer-capitalist society continues", he concludes that "this means we have to work for transition to some kind of "Simpler Way", in which "we live very frugally and self-sufficiently, in economies that are mostly small and have highly localised, self-sufficient and cooperative ways under social control (i.e., not determined by market forces or profit), and without any economic growth. None of these structural changes is possible without huge and radical value change."

However, to begin with, the premise itself is false because it refers only to part of the story. Although it is true that technical fix strategies might not be, by themselves, adequate in dealing with the present huge problems, the elites do not have to rely exclusively on them to avert an ecological catastrophe. In fact, the elites have already begun implementing policies which pass the buck of sorting out the ecological crisis to the population at large. In Britain, for instance, the private car is rapidly becoming a luxury consumption item – as it used to be before the war – through the introduction of pioneering policies by the 'red' Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, which make its use prohibitive – but only for those who cannot afford to pay the heavy charge involved! – in a vast area of central London. The measure has proved so successful that the 'new' Labour government is now planning a nationwide congestion-charging scheme for billing motorists for every journey.^[2] The official reason is supposed to be the fight against traffic congestion, but the real reason is to reduce the car consumerism of the masses. This, in combination with technological fixes on new 'clean' cars etc, is expected to reduce greenhouse emissions. Similar measures are being discussed to reduce the present massive amount of air traffic, by making the cost of flying prohibitive to the masses – as it used to be in the past – etc.

The implications of the ecological crisis were always, of course, class-discriminating in the sense that it was always the poor and the lower social strata in general who were particularly affected by the various 'natural disasters' caused by the greenhouse effect and the consequent climate changes. But it is now clear that the same lower classes will have to pay for the costs of the growth economy in general and the ecological crisis in particular,

while the luxurious consumption standards of the rich will remain unaffected! Furthermore, even if the combination of economic measures against the masses and technological fixes proves inadequate in stopping the ecological crisis, the elites could always resort to various forms of totalitarian measures against their own populations – the legislative background has already been set up with the various anti-terror laws– in order to implement emergency ecological measures. This is a far more likely scenario than the ‘eco-rosy’ scenario presented by Ted, according to which people would realise with a jolt that the old system can no longer provide for them, forcing them to turn to local economic development, as governments would no longer be able or willing to run things for them, and leading, therefore, to the emergence of local systems.

The reason that Ted adopts this unlikely scenario is because, for him, our supreme problem is scarcity, not democracy and power, whereas for the Inclusive Democracy project exactly the opposite is the case, i.e. it is democracy and power that constitute our supreme problem. From the ID viewpoint, the sustainability and scarcity problems could always be ‘sorted out’ somehow by the elites if they reach a complete cul-de-sac, through the introduction of any kind of authoritarian or even fascist measures and restrictions they deem necessary at the moment of crisis. So, the real issue is not the problem of scarcity or sustainability but, rather, **at whose expense** these problems are going to be sorted out: are they going to be solved at the expense of the elites and the privileged social classes, or at the expense of the working classes and the weaker elements of society? The problem is, therefore, whether or not people will establish institutions securing the equal distribution of political, economic and social power (direct, economic and social democracy respectively) which can then create the **institutional preconditions** (inclusive democracy –i.e. decentralisation in terms of confederated self-reliant *demos*) as well as the **cultural preconditions** (*Paideia*) for an ecological democracy.

On the basis of the above –false, to my mind– premise about priorities, Ted argues that the issue is not (as I, supposedly, suggest) the need for a political movement, but ‘how on earth can we get one going’, and his answer is that ‘our best chance will be through an attempt to work here and now on the transformation of existing towns and suburbs towards being “eco-villages” of a kind’ –a process which, he suggests, could begin as of now, through small local groups beginning to take more control over their local economies. This, he concludes, could be achieved with no fight against capitalism: ‘The Simpler Way is death for capitalism, but the way we will defeat it is by ignoring it to death, by turning away from it and building those many bits of the alternative that we could easily build right now’.

However, what I have always stressed is that, only if present antisystemic activities prefiguring the system become an integral part of an antisystemic movement, could they be part of a solution to the critical problem we face today, rather than part of the problem itself. Furthermore, I have always emphasised that the process involves not the creation of eco-villages (mainly outside the main society) but, instead, the creation of local ‘inclusive democracies in action’ which would gradually move resources out of the capitalist market economy and create new political, economic and ecological institutions to replace the present ones^[3]. Finally, I never assumed that the process could be completed without a fight against capitalism, just by ‘ignoring’ it. The present eco-villages do not ignore capitalism, as Mary Garden^[4] aptly stresses –they very much depend on the capitalist state! The real issue, therefore, is whether this fight would only be in terms of building new political and economic institutions through local activity, taking part in local elections etc,

as well as through direct action and demonstrations, or whether it would take the form of a violent revolution. As I have tried to show elsewhere,^[5] a revolution usually involves a movement to take power “from above” –something that will never lead to a genuine democracy; therefore, what we really need is a movement “from below”, which will begin building the new institutions here and now. However, although there is no need for any violent confrontation with the system for the transition to the new system to be achieved, we should be prepared to defend ourselves in case of an attack by the elites, which seems almost inevitable once they start seeing the new movement as a threat to their monopolisation of power and, therefore, their privileges.

Coming to the last question Ted raises, i.e. how we move from here to there, his answer is ‘by beginning here and now tiny “community development cooperatives”, made up of those very few people with the necessary vision, who then take the first minute steps towards a local, cooperative, non-market economy (community gardens, co-ops, working bees, developing commons, workshops, skill banks, sharing, cooperative “firms” etc).’ However, Ted does not talk about new forms of economic democracy, or even about how to integrate existing radical attempts at creating new economic and ecological institutions into a political movement that would provide the catalyst for the development of an antisystemic consciousness, as ID does. This is because he sees the core of the transitional process not in terms of a change of institutions at the local level which, through an interplay with a consequent change in values, would lead to a new culture –as the ID project proposes through, for instance, winning a local authority at the local elections. Instead, he sees the whole process as being effected through a radical change in culture that is not necessarily connected with any parallel institutional change. It is therefore just sufficient for him to rely on eco-village settlements (like many of those belonging to the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)) with a sustainability motivation, for the transitional process to be set in motion.

But then Ted leaves unanswered the crucial question concerning the transitional process (which is actually the central issue for any transitional strategy): how can an antisystemic consciousness be created out of a basically a-political movement like the eco-village movement today? As the GEN^[6] defines itself, it “is a global confederation of people and communities that meet and share their ideas, exchange technologies, develop cultural and educational exchanges, directories and newsletters, and are dedicated to restoring the land and living “sustainable plus” lives by putting more back into the environment than we take out”. This definition alone makes it clear that the GEN is, at most, a single-issue environmentalist movement, which takes no stand at all on the political, economic and social institutions which determine the form of our society and it is, therefore, committed to achieving its aims taking for granted the existing socio-economic system. Therefore, although Ted has taken a consistently anti-market-economy view in his writings (despite the fact that he is not abolitionist as he thinks that, in the near future, we can retain a kind of market for a minor part of the economy), nevertheless, the ecovillages of the GEN (some of which he supports as the basis for a future society) do not, in any way, take a similar stand. In fact, at least one out of the three administrative centres which, as Mary Garden reports, coordinate the three regional networks of the GEN (The Farm at Tennessee, Lebensgarten and Crystal Waters) adopts the New Age^[7] rubbish.

This is also confirmed by an examination of the philosophy of the assortment of various organisations etc that have been classified as members of the network, which mainly

consists either of strictly environmentalist groups (mostly engaged in teaching and/or practicing environment-friendly technologies), or of 'urban rejuvenation projects' (mostly membered by drug addicts, hippie squatters et.al.) or, most of all, of spiritualistic movements of various denominations. The listed members may differ in many respects between them but they have one thing in common: they are a-political, single issue organisations interested only in one aspect of society, i.e. its relationship to Nature (in fact, not even all of it, since the issue of animal treatment for instance is completely ignored by the GEN and, as Mary Garden testifies, eco-villages worldwide generally have a blanket ban on the keeping of dogs and cats as pets!) The relationship of society to the economy and to polity is completely ignored, presumably because the capitalist market economy and representative 'democracy' are taken for granted. No wonder that even the transnational-elite-controlled UN and EU have cooperation/partnership links with the GEN.

As regards the very important links between the eco-village network and various forms of irrationalism, the official GEN website lists 11,000 sustainable villages in Sri Lanka belonging to the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, which is known to be sponsoring public meditations in which tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians meditate together on each other's welfare, using the Buddhist Brahmavihara (Abode of God) meditations that are acceptable within all four faiths^[8]. Similarly, another member of the GEN, the Ladakh project on the Tibetan plateau, is well known for its Tibetan Buddhist culture. Also, another member listed is the Federation of Damanhur in Italy, which holds a mixture of New Age and neopagan beliefs.^[9] Last, but not least, the eco-town of Auroville in South India is listed whose (presumably antisystemic!) self-declared 'sole purpose is to realize human unity in diversity'. The idea for this eco-town, we learn, was originated by 'The Mother' (an "incarnation of the Divine Mother", the female polarity of the Godhead, the Shakti or Adi-shakti from which the entire universe emerges) and Sri Aurobindo (a Hindu mystic believed by the supporters of this eco-town to be an avatar, an incarnation of the Absolute). It is worth noting – as Hildur Jackson, one of the founders of the Gaia Trust and the GEN, stated in a recent interview – that Sri Aurobindo, together with the 'Mother', are believed to have provided the impulse for the creation of the entire eco-village network^[10]!

Therefore, on the basis of the GEN's aims and the composition of its listed members, it is clear that, not only would the eco-village network be unable to provide the basis for a movement leading to the transition to an ecological democracy, but that the network is, in fact, very much part of the problem of today's society. It is obvious that a single-issue philosophy based on the concept of sustainability combined with all sorts of irrational elements has hardly anything to do with the most elementary requirements of an antisystemic project: first, a radical critique of the socio-economic institutions which have led to the present multidimensional crisis – part of which is the ecological crisis. Second, concrete proposals as to how society could be integrated with polity, the economy and Nature through the development of new institutions securing the equal distribution of political, economic and social power. Third, a strategy leading from here to there. Most of all, an antisystemic project requires a rational philosophy founded on democracy as a structure and a process of social self-institution. This implies the democratic adoption of those traditions and that body of knowledge that have as their sources (and are processed by) reason and open discussion, rather than religious or other intuitions (Revelation, intuition, myth or a closed system of ideas and/or 'scientific' truths). The only admissible 'truths', therefore, in an antisystemic movement, including values and ethical codes

conditioning individual behaviour, are those rationally derived and democratically decided upon.

So, to the extent that the eco-village movement is a single-issue movement dominated by irrational philosophies, it is very much part of the problem of transition to a new society rather than its solution, given that it disorients people with respect to the causes and possible ways out of the systemic crisis. I understand Ted Trainer's anxiety to start a movement with existing settlements rather than to begin the difficult and long-term project of creating new, truly anti-systemic ecovillages which, potentially, may be active members of an antisystemic movement for an ecological democracy (perhaps together with some existing organisations like LETS). However, this is the only way forward, unless he wants to be associated, at worst, with all the New Age rubbish and, at best, with what Mary Garden aptly describes as an elitist exclusive club (controlled by a self-appointed central group), capitalising on the growing interest in sustainability in society at large.

[1] For the first exchange see *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July 2000): [Where are we, where do we want to be, how do we get there?](#) by Ted Trainer and [The Limitations of Life-Style strategies: the ecovillage Movement is NOT the way towards a new democratic society](#) by Takis Fotopoulos; and for the second exchange *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002): [Debating the significance of the Global Eco-village Movement: A reply to Takis Fotopoulos](#) by Ted Trainer and [The transition to an alternative society: the Ecovillage movement, the Simpler Way and the Inclusive Democracy project](#) a reply by Takis Fotopoulos

[2] Andrew Clark, 'New minister wants to charge drivers for every journey', *The Guardian* (11/5/2006).

[3] see T. Fotopoulos, '[Transitional strategies and the Inclusive Democracy project](#)', *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002).

[4] see Mary Garden's article in this issue.

[5] T. Fotopoulos, 'Transitional strategies and the Inclusive Democracy project'. See also, on the present transcendence of the historic dilemma of the Left "reform vs. revolution", 'Inclusive Democracy as a way out of the present multi-dimensional crisis' (in this issue)

[6] <http://gen.ecovillage.org/about/index.html>

[7] see on the New Age and other forms of present irrationalism, T. Fotopoulos, '[The Rise of New Irrationalism and its Incompatibility with Inclusive Democracy](#)', *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 4, No. 2/3 (1999).

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvodaya_Shramadana_Movement

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Damamhur

[10] see Mary Garden's article in this issue.