

Inclusive Democracy and Communalism

JOHN SARGIS

Introductory statement from the Editorial Committee:

We do not normally publish forum exchanges. However, this is far from a 'normal' case as it involves a clear attempt by the on-line journal *Communalism* to deny us the right to reply, in face of an obvious distortion of the ID project by supporters of the Communalist project. The facts are as follows:

On August 8, we received the following Google Web Alert for: **"inclusive democracy" bookchin OR communalism OR communalist OR ecology :: [View topic - Ecological Ethics](#)**, which provided a link (not active anymore) with the exchanges in the Communalism Forum that has opened a discussion on the ID project (see below). Considering the content of the threads on ID as distorting our project, John Sargis on behalf of the Editorial Committee, wrote a reply and attempted to send it to the Forum, but he found out that he has to be a registered member of the Forum before being allowed to do so. On August 9, he applied to become a member and received an automated response on August 10 welcoming him and telling him his account needs to be activated by the site administrator. Two days later he received a message from Eirik Eigliad, the editor of *Communalism*, which stated, "I know you to be a member the editorial group around Fotopoulos's Inclusive Democracy Project. For this reason I cannot allow you membership: We belong to different movements. If you want to comment on any of the essays, please write a letter to the editor". John replied immediately to this message showing the contradictions between the "Guidelines for contributors" and the decision to decline his application and insisting on his right to reply. Eigliad's further reply ignored John's points and magnanimously offered an exchange of perspectives "at some point", presumably because he did not think that such an exchange was necessary anyway, as he admitted that he "have not considered Fotopoulos's ideas to be very important"! On August 14, John replied to this message making the proposal to send a letter to the editor of *Communalism* (which of course had to be published uncensored), together with the relevant threads, in order to correct the serious misrepresentations (if not distortions) of the ID project made by some participants in the Forum exchanges. In reply, John received a new message from the editor of *Communalism* which was accompanied by the locking of the Forum, so that not only participation in the exchanges by non-members, but even simple visits to it, became impossible! The editor of *Communalism*, having secured this way the 'immunization' of his Forum and that we will not be able even to check the way our reply was going to be posted, he then proceeded to offer us magnanimously a right to reply!

Although by this time we had every right to stop the exchanges which had become by this stage meaningless, still, in the spirit of comradeship that we believe should always exist between people fighting for the replacement of the System with a new one, we made a final

attempt and we suggested what we considered the only logical compromise under the circumstances. Thus, accepting at face value the “coincidence” of the Forum being closed at the very moment we requested the right to reply, we proposed an extension of the semi-closed nature of the forum (which prevailed at the time of posting the distorting of the ID project comments) for a month or so—something that would allow also visitors from the general public to read our reply. Yet, the editor of *Communalism* declined even this logical proposal stressing that “if we should have a real debate then it should be done in pages of a journal, with serious dialogue” and adding that “I have not deemed Takis's ideas important to debate or discuss before, and have no time to engage in this now; but if you want a real debate between social ecologists and the ID project I am sure that can be arranged later”. To this, John replied in his final communication on August 18 that “clearly a honest debate can only take place between people who consider the views of each other really important but have various theoretical queries/ doubts/ disagreements about them”. He then pointed out that it was in this spirit that Takis critically dealt with Murray's views in his writings, and that obviously we do not have any interest anymore in taking part in a dialogue with people who do not consider the ID project significant –particularly so since we repeatedly assessed critically in public the Communalist project in the past .

So much for Communalists and how they see democracy and the right to reply. Below, follow the threads relevant to the ID project, as they were published (minus some personal details), together with our reply. Needless to add that for us the matter is closed.

The Editorial Committee
August 20, 2008

Addendum

It has just come to the attention of the Editorial Committee that at the exact same time Eirik Eigliad and the Communalist project was closing to us and the public open debate, critical analysis, or robust dialogue around Communalism, Eirik was also engaging in the same type of behavior with [Negations](#) where Chuck posted on 14 August 2008 Eirik's panic that Chuck posted his un-copyrighted article without permission. But more to the point Chuck explains the reason of Eirik's indignation in what after all was a straight reproduction of his article in another website—a usual practice on the internet. As Chuck stresses “this is a control issue: on this blog he would be unable to curtail a critical discussion of his essay or Bookchin generally, whereas he can exclude critics at a whim on his (temporarily unavailable) [Communalism forums](#). Whatever his motives, Eigliad is mistaken if he thinks that he can promote Bookchin's ideas *and* silence Bookchin's critics at the same time. That is simply not possible. Whatever lessons Bookchin has to offer—and I think there are many—will emerge only in the context of a critical analysis of his life and work. Indeed, Bookchin's contributions will either be criticized or they will be forgotten.”

This “coincidental” experience proves again that open and free dialogue with Communalism is out of the question.

The Editorial Committee
November 1, 2008

Comments published in the *Communalism* Forum on the ID project:

Marcus Melder

PostPosted: Sat Aug 02, 2008 3:50 am Post subject: Reply with quote

I just re-read the last chapter of Fotopoulos's book "Towards an Inclusive Democracy". In it Fotopoulos clearly states that dialectical naturalism is non-teleological and that it "assumes a directionality towards a democratic ecological society - a society that may never be actualized because of 'fortuitous events'". He says that though this hypothesis is not groundless, it nevertheless is "undesirable and untenable".

I am more interested in the "untenable" part.

Quote:

... although one may have no reservations in adopting the hypothesis that self-consciousness and self-reflection have their own history in the natural world and are not sui generis ... it would be a big jump to adopt a similar hypothesis progress toward a free society. In other words, even if one accepts the hypothesis that self-consciousness and self-reflection, in very broad terms, are part of a dialectical unfolding in Nature and do not represent a rupture with the past, this does not imply that there is a similar dialectical unfolding towards a free society i.e., an inclusive democracy. Such a view is incompatible with historical evidence which clearly shows that the historical attempts at a free society have always been the result of a rupture with the instituted heteronomy which has been dominant in the past, rather than a sort of processual "product". (p.330-331)

and later he writes

Quote:

... to assume that the possibility for autonomy is an unfolding and therefore rational potentiality (in the dialectical sense of the word) and conversely to assume away the possibility for heteronomy as just a capacity for irrationality may easily be seen as a deliberate objectivization of possibility at the expense of the other, in order to conceal our choice for the autonomy tradition under the cover of dialectical "objectivity". (p.339)

I am interested in any critique or defense of Fotopoulos's criticism of dialectical naturalism. At this point in my intellectual development, it is beyond me take a clear position. But, I think that in the first quote the argument, which is elaborated further in the book, comes across as sound. As for the last quote, Bookchin made the point clearly

that every society always understood nature through the lens of their interactions with each other, and I was already wondering (before reading Fotopoulos) if Bookchin's view of an objective ethics could actually be based on his views of what society should be.

Peter Munsterman

PostPosted: Sun Aug 03, 2008 10:09 am Post subject: Reply with quote

Let's assume Fotopoulos's statements in the first quotation are correct.

If self-direction (self-consciousness and self-reflection, which together constitute choice) has its origins in first nature in its most nascent form as metabolic self-maintenance and its actualization in a potential "free nature", then what is the origin of a free society? If the logical development of first nature's evolution (the nisis of self-direction) is not in a free society then what exactly is it in?

A free society is a rational society; if there is not a logical origin of "inclusive democracy" in natural evolution's nisis, then where does it come from? Where then, in the transcendence of both first and second nature into a "free nature," does "inclusive democracy" spring from?*

As Bookchin states in the Philosophy of Social Ecology:

Quote:

An ecological dialectic produces a creative paradox: second nature in an ecological society would be the actualization of first nature's potentiality to achieve mind and truth. Human intellection in an ecological society would thus "fold back" upon the evolutionary continuum that exists in first nature. In this sense—and in this sense alone—second nature would thus become first nature rendered self-reflexive, a thinking nature that would know itself and could guide its own evolution. (p.136, 1995 ed., my emphasis)

If such transcendence occurs (resulting in an ecological society or "free nature") in which humanity could guide evolution (in the actualization of nature's nisis of self-direction)—not simply exist limited by instinct—to rationally act upon its own environment, and is to so be regarded as anything but the rational outcome of that nisis is to deny the validity of dialectical reasoning and casts ecological thinking into a world in which conventional reasoning or intuition are fair game for understanding the world (to paraphrase Bookchin, p.137).

The actualization of a "free nature" is the realization of first nature's nisis of self-direction; it is of the same dialectic development.

If that much is to be agreed upon, then I believe that Fotopoulos's views can rightly be regarded as obfusatory. A dichotomy between the development toward self-consciousness/reflection [self-direction] and a free society requires reasoned justification;

such a dichotomy indeed requires a “big jump” away from dialectical reasoning.

As for the lack of historical evidence, Bookchin’s four volume set, *The Third Revolution*, addresses such a limited claim (if I’m not mistaken).

*I don’t know what Fotopoulos means by “inclusive democracy” (I’d have to read the piece that Marcus is quoting from), but even if such an institution came into being it would hardly constitute a rational or free society itself. If “inclusive democracy” means direct-democracy then I see no other rational form of public decision making in a free society other than one that reflects rational self direction (guided by an ecological ethics).

Last edited by Peter Munsterman on Wed Aug 06, 2008 10:08 am

Thodoris Velissaris

PostPosted: Thu Aug 07, 2008 6:07 pm Post subject: Reply with quote

I agree with Peter's insightful comments.

Generally, when someone is reading Fotopoulos, must have in mind that he is deeply influenced by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. For Fotopoulos, autonomy, freedom, or inclusive democracy, are simply subjective, responsible, and conscious choices. We do not know objectively he assumes, if fascism is more preferable than libertarian socialism concerning social liberation. It is simply our choice to struggle for inclusive democracy.

So, everything we say it is just an opinion. We are not for Fotopoulos natural and social beings rooted in natural and social history (I refer here to this dualism, nature-society, knowing that can be negated in a “free nature”). Our choices are ruptures he states! As if it would be possible to talk today about communalism without the long liberatory historical process that led here. Freedom is the history of freedom. Could we speak about communalism in ancient Egypt, without Athen's democracy, medieval communities, great revolutions, industrialization etc? I am not determinist, maybe history could be different. But we must educe what is freedom and liberation from History, if we don't want to struggle for something that we do not know if it is worth to struggle for. For a “subjective” choice.

I am preparing a defense of Fotopoulos' critique of dialectical naturalism and a critique of Inclusive Democracy's basic promises, so I will come back in the future.

Teo

"For we shall recognize as truth at last,
What here as beauty only we have viewed".

John Sargis' reply (not published in the Forum)

I take part in this “dialogue” only to state what the Inclusive Democracy project and Fotopoulos actually state, because I think that the above description, at best, oversimplifies this project because of fundamental ignorance of it and, at worst, distorts it.

Peter Munsterman, for instance, attempts to reply to Fotopoulos' critique of dialectical naturalism taking for granted Bookchin's theory and its ontological and epistemological assumptions, which however is the very object of discussion given Fotopoulos explicit rejection of these assumptions!

Teo Velissaris' case is even worse because he had been a member of the ID network for several years and yet it is obvious that either he did not understand a thing of what he was defending before he moved to Communalism a couple of years ago, or deliberately distorts it.

He writes:

>>We must have in mind that he (Fotopoulos) is deeply influenced by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis.

However, the ID project is not a product of parthenogenesis and Fotopoulos has explicitly stated so since he begun discussing it more than ten years ago, i.e., that it represents an attempt for a synthesis of traditions.

One of these traditions was the autonomy/democratic tradition, on the theorization of which Castoriadis has carried out some significant work —although the fundamental theoretical and political differences between Fotopoulos and Castoriadis' thought have clearly been expressed (see the latest article on the matter at IJID, “[The Autonomy project and Inclusive Democracy: A critical review of Castoriadis' thought](#)”).

Another was the libertarian socialism tradition, on the theorization of which Bookchin also carried out a significant amount of work —although, again, the fundamental theoretical and political differences between Social Ecology/Communalism and ID have also been expressed repeatedly in the past (see the latest article on the matter the section on Social Ecology/Communalism in “[Recent Theoretical Developments on the Inclusive Democracy Project](#)”).

Needless to add that neither Castoriadis' project nor that of Bookchin were, also, the products of parthenogenesis —as any major theoretical project for that matter— and the deep influences of Freud, Arendt, et. al. on the former and of Hegel, Kropotkin, et. al. on the latter are well known.

He then distorts Fotopoulos, writing:

>>We do not know objectively he assumes, if fascism is more preferable than libertarian socialism concerning social liberation. It is simply our choice to

struggle for inclusive democracy.

In fact, however, Fotopoulos' argument is much more subtle than what Teo thinks. As Fotopoulos stressed in his book [*Towards an Inclusive Democracy*](#):

Quote:

... the grounding of a free society on a conscious choice does not deprive us of an ethical criterion to assess the various forms of social organisation. In fact, the degree to which a form of social organisation secures an equal distribution of political, economic and social power is a powerful criterion to assess it. But this is a criterion chosen by us and not implied by some sort of evolutionary process (p. 340) ... the fact that the project of autonomy is not objectively grounded does not mean that “anything goes” and that it is therefore impossible to derive any definable body of principles to assess social and political changes, or to develop a set of ethical values to assess human behaviour. Reason is still necessary in a process of deriving the principles and values which are consistent with the project of autonomy and, in this sense, are rational. Therefore, the principles and values derived within such a process do not just express personal tastes and desires and in fact, they are much more “objective” than the principles and values that are derived from disputable interpretations of natural and social evolution. The logical consistency of the former with the project of autonomy could be assessed in an indisputable way, unlike the contestable “objectivity” of the latter (p. 345)

It is clear, therefore, that Fotopoulos does not dispute that it can be rationally shown that fascism is more preferable than libertarian socialism. In fact in his article on liberatory ethics he even tried to show the sort of ethical values that will be consistent with an autonomous democratic society. What he does dispute is that we can show the existence of certain “laws” or “tendencies” of historical evolution leading to a free society (Marx) or similarly that we can show the existence of some “directionalities” and potentialities in natural evolution leading to a free society (Bookchin). He rejects these approaches as attempts to objectify the liberatory project –attempts which might have been legitimate for Marx and Kropotkin to adopt in the 19th century but which are completely untenable in the 21st century, when not only the “objectivity” of the analysis of social phenomena is not tenable anymore but, increasingly so, even that of natural phenomena. This, not forgetting where the objectification of the liberatory project could lead, from totalitarianism, up to deep ecology.

Social evolution, as a continuation and extension of natural evolution, is the basic flaw of Bookchin's theory. This is so because the actualization of human potentialities requires consciousness (unlike the realization of the acorn's potentialities). Consciousness may lead to either autonomy or heteronomy and therefore there is simply no way to establish any kind of 'directionality', as Bookchin assumes, towards an autonomous society. Natural law cannot be the basis of a democratic society. This is not only impossible but also undesirable because of the possible dogmatic implications that could follow a belief in that natural law can justify a democratically organized society. A society based on universal and absolute laws is not compatible with democracy. The Aztecs, whose society was founded on religious dogma, succumbed to the Spanish conquistadors because their religious-based government

could not explain the appearance of the “two-headed god” even though militarily they could have annihilated the invaders. Therefore, Bookchin’s dialectical naturalism cannot account for an objective ethics, or a process of natural evolution towards an autonomous society.

Teo then writes:

>>Our choices are ruptures he states! As if it would be possible to talk today about communalism without the long liberatory historical process that led here. Freedom is the history of freedom. Could we speak about communalism in ancient Egypt, without Athen's democracy, medieval communities, great revolutions, industrialization etc?

First, as the first quote mentioned above by Marcus Melder makes clear, Fotopoulos does not talk in general about our choices being ruptures. He specifically states in this quote:

“The historical attempts for a free society have always been the result of a rupture with the instituted heteronomy, which has been dominant in the past”.

I would therefore, oblige if Teo can show us cases where a historical attempt for a free society has NOT been the result of a rupture with the instituted heteronomy.

Teo then goes on to argue, mixing up institutions with liberatory demands, that we cannot talk about communalism today without reference to the long liberatory historical process within which the liberatory demands and values developed. But, this is exactly what Fotopoulos stresses when he argues that the entire History can be seen in terms of the historical conflict between the autonomy and the heteronomy traditions and that Athens’ democracy, medieval communities, great revolutions, etc. have been incidents expressing the former tradition, which however cannot establish any “process” leading to a free society. If the demands of those supporting the autonomy tradition today are more “advanced” than the democratic demands of classical Athenians this is simply the result of the fact that the issue of economic democracy, let alone ecological democracy, could not have been raised in classical Athens, given the very different organization of economy at the time. It is human choices (the ones made by the elites within the heteronomy tradition) which have led to the system of market economy and the resulting growth economy and the present ecological catastrophe, and it is again human choices (the ones made by people expressing the autonomy tradition) which have broadened the democratic demands accordingly to take into account the changes in the institutional framework effected by the elites. This has nothing to do with dialectical materialism or dialectical naturalism, but has everything to do with the historical social struggle between those supporting the heteronomy tradition vs. those supporting the autonomy tradition—a historical struggle — whose historical form at each historical moment is of course conditioned by the concrete institutional framework, as has been determined historically— BUT WHOSE OUTCOME IS ALWAYS UNDETERMINED. History has always been a struggle between those fighting for autonomy and those struggling to maintain the status quo and their privileges, i.e., heteronomy. That is the choice facing us.

This is just an attempt to state briefly what the ID project actually states without the above oversimplifications, if not distortions, and I have no intention to continue this dialogue here, particularly with people who have not read or understood (to say the least) what the

ID critique of dialectical naturalism is all about. If any of you are interested in criticizing, in article form, the ID project we will be happy to consider it for publication in the *International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* together with our reply, so that a real dialogue could take place rather than a monologue between communalists and sympathizers, as in this Forum.

John Sargis,
August 13, 2008