

# On eco-villages and the transition

**TED TRAINER**

In the last issue Mary Garden and Teo Velissaris made interesting contributions on the possible significance of the eco-village movement for the transition from capitalist to sustainable and just society. Following are some brief thoughts that I would like to contribute on the issue.

If we focus on the global situation we must recognise that consumer-capitalist society is far beyond sustainable levels of per capita resource use, and that we must face up to reductions of something like 90% in present levels.<sup>[1]</sup> The magnitude of this change is much greater than most people understand and it decisively settles a number of issues. There is no possibility of technical fix strategies cutting resource use sufficiently to solve the problems while anything like a consumer-capitalist society continues.

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.

Hence the first way in which the eco-village movement is relevant; whether we like it or not the basic form of settlement in a sustainable society (not the only one; there can still be cities) has to be a highly self-sufficient and cooperative and self-governing eco-village.

The chances of achieving such a transition in the time available are very poor, especially in view of the fact that all mainstream institutions, and publics remain fiercely committed to affluence and growth, even including most people in green, red and other critical movements, and refuse to think about the situation in the terms I am using here..

There is no possibility of achieving significant change in this massively complacent society before the crises impact. While the supermarkets are stacked and the share prices are high, there will be no interest in change from the pursuit of affluence and growth. The probability of a severe petroleum supply crisis impacting within ten years, possibly accompanied by a collapse of the global financial house of cards, will concentrate minds wonderfully. We will then get our chance. People will realise with a jolt that the old system cannot provide for them and they will be forced to turn to local economic development. Governments will not be able or willing to run things for us so local systems will emerge, run by local people or they will not survive.

There is a good chance however that the window of opportunity will soon be closed by chaotic failure to reorganise in sensible ways, or a knee-jerk response from the ruling class and the public in general to grab more oilfields.

Now, given this situation, what can/should we do?

Takis keeps saying that we need a political movement - of course we do, but the question which he does not help with is how on earth can we get one going, one that will head in the required direction?

My answer has been 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. People will be forced in this direction by the coming scarcity, so we should be thinking now about how we can work with this force. It seems obvious to me that if we ever do manage to get to a sustainable and just world this is the way it will happen, i.e., via small local groups beginning to grope their way towards taking more control over their local economies. Our role is to lead/facilitate this.

The new economies can only work if people are motivated by positive forces, by desire to run things, cooperate, share, care for each other, build good systems. People must be willing to go to working bees and committees, because they are enjoyable, and because they provide a satisfying sense of empowerment, worthwhile activity, security, camaraderie and collectivism. There is no possibility of satisfactory local systems being driven by force, punishment or centralised authorities, let alone imposed by state bureaucracies or secret police. They will be motivated by eager, conscientious, responsible desire to contribute or they will not work. Obviously the most crucial and least likely element in this revolution is this immense cultural change.

This revolution cannot be led by vanguard parties and there is no value in capturing state power., What's more, it will not be about fighting against capitalism. It is of course a mortal struggle; 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. Yes the system could crush us in an instant, by a few legal changes (e.g., prohibiting local currencies), but with a little luck it will be too preoccupied by breakdowns and too resource-stressed to notice us until it's too late. Anyway, when there's no petrol to get the goods to the supermarket and none to get the SUV there to purchase them, and people start abandoning all that for the local systems they can see are their only hope, there will be no need to fight against capitalism.

But how could we get to the state where existing towns and suburbs have been converted into eco-villages of a kind? 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. They can start community gardens, co-ops, working bees, developing commons, workshops, skill banks, sharing, and cooperative "firms", so that people can begin devoting some of their labour, skill and energy and local resources to meeting their own needs. To do any of these things is to have initiated a totally new and radical economy. There is nothing to prevent little groups of people doing this, and many are, especially in the Third World. (Some eco-villages are working heroically to facilitate thus things in their regions; e.g., Ithica eco-village.)

It is not being assumed that merely demonstrating an alternative is sufficient. These CDCs

will be our educational devices, our teaching aids, and the bases from which our long and arduous educational campaigns can best be launched. The new political movement cannot be built without a slow process of getting people to grasp the wisdom of The Simpler Way, but this will be far more effectively done if they can see within their locality groups practising those ways and enjoying their benefits.

All this means that the anarchists have won the main arguments. In this revolution that it is a mistake to work to take state power, or to establish ruthless vanguards. The working class has no privileged role or opportunity to lead. We do not have to eliminate capitalism before we can start to build the new society; we can "prefigure" it here and now and enjoy some of its benefits. Indeed there is no other way to bring it into existence than by at some point in time starting to build bits of it so that people can learn the unfamiliar new ways as they go.

This is not salvation through the creation of eco-villages in the sense of intentional communities made up of people who come together with the right vision to form a new society on a new patch of ground. It is about beginning with existing settlements and gradually converting them into eco-villages of a kind, not necessarily with common ownership of most property. What matters in the middle distance future is the establishment of sufficient collective property and spirit.

If the revolution was simply about replacing capitalist control of consumer society by socialist control it could be in principle be done from the top down, quickly ( and if necessary, ruthlessly. But the brutal, fundamental fact of coming severe scarcity means that this revolution can't be like that. It means that the goal has to be largely autonomous small communities managing their local economies and ecosystems well to enable frugal, cooperative and highly self-sufficient lifestyles. The core of the revolution therefore is radical change in culture, to a worldview which willingly and happily energises the new ways and that cannot be forced or even given. It can only be developed, worked out, learned by people where they live as they grope to local management of their particular local situation and conditions.

So if we do by some miracle get through and we save the planet, Mary might reconsider whether I was right to suggest that the beginning of the eco-village movement was the most significant thing that happened in the twentieth century.

In our earlier exchanges I think Takis was mistaken in claiming large and fundamental differences between an "Inclusive Democracy" strategy and a "Simpler Way" strategy. I do not see any significant contradiction. Both are anti-systemic, anti-state, anti-market (although I think in the near future we can retain a kind of market for a minor part of the economy, under tight social control - eventually we'll scrap it). Both assume the need for radical structural change, radical participatory democracy, and a political movement. My main difference with Takis is that he gives us no help regarding the ways we might begin the required political movement. It is precisely that problem that I am claiming that the eco-village vision and the formation of Community Development Cooperatives addresses.

So, theorists and activists, please get into projects of this general kind. I firmly believe that most of what we are doing now, the writing of elegant treatises, the saving of the whale, the "resisting", the attending WSF forums, is a waste of precious and scarce time and energy.

My challenge to you is, given our situation, given the context of intense scarcity, given the fact that we must shift to some kind of Simpler Way, what makes more sense than to begin those CDCs? They give us no guarantee -- indeed I do not think this strategy or any other will save us from a chaotic century. But I do think it gives us our best chance.

---

[1] For the detailed argument see <http://socialwork.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/02-The-Simpler-Way.html>.