Reaching systemic change: some brief remarks on Mary Garden's "Leaving Utopia"

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Mary Garden's "Leaving Utopia"[1] provides a very interesting overview of the individual problems people confront while living in alternative communities-- especially those that are part of the "Global Ecovillage Network." This description though, fails to see these problems in the light of the aims of (at least some) participants in this movement, who saw these alternative communities not just as an individualistic escape from the stress created by living in the present internationalized market economy and the social and ecological crisis associated with it but, also, as the basis for an alternative society. Even more so, it scantly discusses the arguments put forward by supporters of the eco-village movement like Ted Trainer, who saw it as a "general strategic beginning point (which) could achieve a more or less peaceful replacement of the capitalist system".[2] Even though Garden is absolutely right when she demands "a good dose of realism" about the information provided for ecovillages and a more accurate picture about life in them, instead of the common idealization, I believe that some of the most important aspects of the issue are not considered in her text. My aim, therefore, in the rest of this paper is to highlight these points and show why, for Inclusive Democracy's (ID) supporters, "leaving utopia" means mainly understanding the fact that alternative communities and institutions cannot by themselves help to overcome the global multi-dimensional crisis that we face today.

One of the problematic elements that lay behind ecovillages is that the people involved think that joining them signals the end of their problems (problems they mainly face in the modern urban impersonal carcinomas, that we excessively call cities). Thus, participants seem to assume that every consequence derived from the multi-dimensional crisis, which is generated by our socio-economic system (namely the system of the market economy and representative "democracy") could be overcome in the safe haven that ecovillages provide. This is already a utopia in the negative sense of the word.

The very fact that an eco-village community may be run on principles of direct and ecological democracy, or even sharing as well, does not mean that it automatically qualifies as part of an alternative society, or even as the source of a movement towards it, as Ted Trainer[3] assumes. Castoriadis[4] once stressed that an important distinction has to be drawn between democracy as a process and democracy as a regime. The key idea behind this distinction is that democracy cannot truly succeed if it is not supported by democratic institutions that allow people to control *every* aspect of their life in a variety of levels (political, economical etc). Thus, trying to live democratically in a society ruled by elites, through institutions that allow the concentration of all kinds of power in their hands, means reducing democracy to a mere process destined to be impracticable, as well as irrelevant to the conception of democracy as a comprehensive set of institutions and

processes which constitute a new form of social organization. The same can be said about ecovillages: trying to live harmoniously and ecologically in small communes when, at the same time, society is institutionalized in a way that secures its ruling by forces that destroy environment, launch wars and socialize individuals in completely different values, is rather myopic.

As Takis Fotopoulos[5] stressed in his debate with Ted Trainer, for ID, the "...political and economic structures condition the value systems and culture and therefore the 'dominant social paradigm' i.e. the system of beliefs, ideas and their corresponding values which is associated with the political, economic and social institutions... it is these structures and relations which crucially condition values and culture rather than the other way round... Therefore, the ID project rejects the view that social change will come about through changing values and developing alternative life-styles with no agreement necessary on ultimate ends." However, as it is evident from the interesting experiences of people Garden quotes, these folks were joining ecovillages with an already false hope: that they could solve their own problems without touching the main institutional framework and its corresponding ideology.

Dealing with the reasons accounting for the historical failure of the big majority of the communes, Garden points out: "The reasons for this failure are varied. Many groups folded because of interpersonal conflicts exacerbated by the pressure of the hippy creed of living in 'perfect harmony'. There was the lack of privacy of communal living – both physical and emotional – and there were difficulties with sharing not only assets but also partners. And there was the realisation that it was not possible to live completely independent from the mainstream society. One could not pay the rates with a bunch of bananas." This, not only clearly shows the non-feasibility of creating a 'Robinson Crusoe' utopian island in the midst of present society but it is also indicative of the political frustration that (at least some) communards felt when they realised that this is a clearly unsuitable way to change society and live with dignity. As long as communards or ecovillages do not challenge vested society, their attempts could only fail, or be incorporated by the system. And this drives us to the core: most people in ecovillages seem to be mainly interested in meeting their own needs (which they erroneously think could be met outside the main society) rather than in changing society itself.

Garden, on the other hand, has a dubious position about the few communes that survived: "However a number of the original alternative communities did survive and one could conclude from the mere fact that they have survived for thirty plus years, that they are success stories". However, the question that arises here is in what sense they are success stories. Merely because they survived? In this sense, monasteries are also success stories, particularly so, since they also succeeded in their own aims-- something that does not apply to those communards who wished to change society by example. It is therefore clear that Garden concentrates on the "micro" sociological criteria of success, ignoring the "macro" sociological aims of some at least of the communards. But, in fact, it is only the latter aims, which could prevent the entire discussion degenerating into a research exercise about individualistic ways of enhancing the pleasure of a minority of people.

All the testimonials Gardens provides, clearly show the failure of the ecovillage movement to function as an example for a new way of organising society. It is obvious that the aims of communards are purely individualistic, since they seem only interested in changing their

way of life for various psychological and related reasons or, at most, because they don't like the present way of life in cities. This does not even amount to what Murray Bookchin aptly called life-style anarchism[6], but just to life-style liberalism!

The problems all these people she quotes (including herself) confronted in alternative communities exist also outside ecovillages, in ordinary cities and communities. Noise, bullies etc, makes our life difficult whether we live in ecovillages or not. However, most of these problems arise out of the individualistic values conditioning the behaviour of people (either living in ordinary, or alternative, communities), i.e. the values which are consistent with the present system and into which people have been socialised since birth. This is why we need new, genuine, democratic *institutions* and a new social paradigm, as well as a new democratic ethics derived by a continuous interaction between changes in institutions and changes in values and implemented by a mass democratic movement. Building alternative institutions will be valuable in this effort, as long however as they are part of an antisystemic project and of an explicitly antisystemic movement aiming to prefigure a new society.

Garden concludes: "After 14 years of being involved with eco-villages, I believe they are a viable alternative to living in the suburbs or inner city living. There are things I like about them and things I don't. These places are just another place to live – they will suit some people and certainly won't suit others. There would be far less resentment amongst those who finally do leave, if they had been told the truth at the outset. And maybe some wouldn't have gone there in the first place." No one would disagree of course with this conclusion since, in this sense, it is true that ecovillages may indeed be a viable alternative to living in the suburbs or inner city living. But, this resembles the ghettoes of the rich, the only differences with them being that ecovillages have also an ideology to justify themselves and that it is the middle classes rather than the upper classes who run them. Clearly, this has nothing to do with a movement to change society and, consequently, with a realistic (although arduous) strategy to make something like this possible.

To sum up, as Takis Fotopoulos[7] put it:

> social transformation towards an inclusive democracy would never come about by 'example and education' alone, since the required change in values and culture can only be the outcome of a process of continuous interaction between changes in institutions and changes in values. In other words, the change in values would have to come about as part of a programmatic political movement with an overall goal for systemic change, rather than as part of the activities of some fractionalised movements to create a new relation between the sexes, identities, or society and nature... the fundamental precondition for this is that these activities should be part of a political movement with clear goals about systemic change. The rationale behind this strategy is that, as systemic change requires a rupture with the past which extends to both the institutional and the cultural level, such a rupture is only possible through the development of a new political organisation and a new comprehensive political program for systemic change.

And, as he explains elsewhere:[8]

the change in values is interlinked with and dependent on the change in structures at a significant social scale...the creation of a genuine democratic consciousness among citizens...presupposes a 'living experience' of democracy which can only be realised through the parallel introduction of new institutions of political and economic democracy. This can only be done within the context of an antisystemic movement ...engaged both in a struggle to fight the existing system ... and to build in parallel the new institutions, through the creation of what I call 'local inclusive democracies' that involve the introduction of new political, social and economic institutions at a significant social scale.

This implies that ecovillagers should place their tries among antisystemic lines in order to succeed making this world better, or even succeed in improving their life. New World Order's wars, ecological degradation, economic crisis and political apathy will, sooner or later, threaten even the most isolated ecovillage paradises. Building an inclusive democracy or a similar society is both a necessity and a desire, in these ruthless times, when the sarcastic laughing of humanity's victimizers is becoming more and more intolerable for our ears.

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[1] In this issue

[2] Ted Trainer, 'Debating the significance of the Global Eco-village Movement; A reply to Takis Fotopoulos', *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Cornelius Castoriadis, (*La Montée de l'insignifiance*, Seuil, 1996), pp. 221-241.

[5] Takis Fotopoulos, 'The limitations of Life-style strategies: The Ecovillage "Movement" is NOT the way towards a new democratic society', Democracy & Nature, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July 2000).

[6] Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* (AK Press, 1995).

[7] Takis Fotopoulos, 'The limitations of Life-style strategies.'

[8] Takis Fotopoulos, 'The transition to an alternative society: the Ecovillage movement, the Simpler Way and the Inclusive Democracy project' *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2002).