



Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies

Oliver Ressler

The ongoing exhibition project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" (2003 – 2007) by Oliver Ressler focuses on diverse concepts and models for alternative economies and societies, which all share a rejection of the capitalist system of rule. An interview was carried out for each of the 16 concepts, which are presented as 20 to 37 minutes long videos. Interview partners include economists, political scientists, authors, and historians. The following are three transcription excerpts of video interviews carried out for the project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies".

The Socialism of the 21st Century Heinz Dieterich

Transcription excerpt of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Rotenburg / Wümme, Germany, 26 min., 2007

The basic premise of my book is that you need to have certain objective conditions to have democracy; you cannot have democracy, just as a wish, and impose it on any objective world scenery or acting. First of all, there has to be a certain level of material well being, you need a certain quality of life. That implies that you can have a very extensive educational system, which is open and free for all, and then of course you must have the willingness in the people to have a democratic society instead of, let's say, a theocratic society. At the end, you need an economy that sets you free from unnecessary work so that you have time to participate in public affairs. I think these conditions have been reached today so that the authoritarian development of social democracy and historic socialism in eastern Europe was a phenomena much due to the circumstances of the World Wars, the Second World War and then of the Cold War, and that there's no need to have that once again. You cannot substitute democratic participation by the rule of surrogate force, the Communist Party in that case, neither, of course, of a capitalist elite, and, neither, of course, of a state bureaucracy. So, I think we've all learned from these things. The objective conditions are much more prone to a real participatory democracy. I think there's never been a better chance to have a real direct democracy than we do have today. [...]

I think it is a misunderstanding to think that participatory democracy will be that everybody decides any trivial subject. That was tried in the French Revolution and, of course, it leads to immediate breakdown of operational capacity of the state. First of all, it's impossible that everybody decides on everything. And, second, it's not necessary. The trivial things in a small village; they have to decide if they put lights in the streets or not, that doesn't mean a referendum, I guess. So you will have a mixture of direct democracy where you have electronic plebiscites and referenda and of



representative democracy. And, the important thing is that you extend direct democracy to the economic, the political, the cultural and the military sphere. You cannot exclude any of these four basic social relations, which form our life. And, that of course, requires another objective condition. People must have free time to inform themselves what economists know, what political scientists know and so on. They need time to debate alternatives. So direct democracy today is possible because you have the technological basis, the Internet. You need the decision and information transmission in real time in gigantic geographical spaces. And, that we can do today. So for the first time since the Greeks, that it is really possible to have a direct democracy, where the will of the people decide the important issues.

- Heinz Dieterich, author of "Socialismo del Siglo XXI" (1996), professor of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City.

Libertarian Municipalism Chaia Heller

Transcription excerpt of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Leverett, U.S.A., 32 min., 2005

Libertarian municipalism is the political branch of social ecology. [Murray] Bookchin really comes out of the Marxian tradition, believing that philosophy needs to be alive in the world, and needs to be in the service of human kind. Libertarian municipalism is basically a philosophy that says, that everyday people, citizens, cities and towns and villages across the world are rationally capable of governing themselves. And what he tries to do is balance principles of autonomy and cooperation through the philosophy of libertarian municipalism, by saying what would happen if you had communities that had autonomy on a local level, but that that autonomy was always limited by and in dialogue with a larger collectivity, which would be the confederation. So there is a tension between the self-governing municipality, which would be a self-governing city, town or village, and the larger confederation, that the city or town or village is part of. The citizens are bound together by sharing a common constitution that is grounded on a set of ecological and social principles, and the confederation is bound together by that same exact constitution.

There is a tremendous concern among leftists about what is democracy, what ought it to look like, and what ought it to become. As a social ecologist, for me there is the sense that we have the potential to have a direct democracy; which means, that people in cities, towns and villages would gather as citizens in a local town meeting, which you could call a general assembly, or public assembly, or citizens assembly. It is that body that would be the driving force for policymaking in society in general.

- Chaia Heller, activist and author of "Ecology of Everyday Life: Rethinking the Desire for Nature" (1999)

**Anarchist Consensual Democracy****Ralf Burnicki**

Transcription excerpt of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Bielefeld, Germany, 29 min., 2005

Anarchy is so difficult for people to understand because many people can't imagine life without control, the organs of the state, control from above. They haven't learned to develop self-administered, organizational structures; they haven't learned to realize dominance-free decision-making, beginning with their private affairs. Therefore, a certain blind spot exists in today's so-called democracy: people are taught about human rights, Paragraph 1 of the (German) constitution, "The dignity of man is inviolable," espouses concepts that approximate or correspond to democracy. Yet the everyday application of what is required of democratic systems, namely, the population's actual self-determination, self-administration, and self-organization, is neglected.

If I want to describe the anarchist principle or model of consensus, perhaps it is helpful to first speak of this consensus model as a theory of independent decision-making or as a theory of direct democracy. The model refers to the intrinsic value of political decisions; that is, the way that a political decision is made is put at the center of focus. "Consensus" stems etymologically from the concept of "accordance," "agreement." Consensus, because it should be free of dominance and refers to an actual communication and decision-making process, is important in concrete decision-making. In a theory of direct democracy, concrete decision-making means, for example, that the agenda includes questions of how to produce something. For example: How can we build a center? How can we build a street? How can we build a collective? What should we do? Looking at representative democracy – a democratic form characterized by representative systems – it becomes clear that massive numbers of people who are directly affected by these systems are ignored.

- *Ralf Burnicki, author of "Anarchismus und Konsens" (2002)*

Oliver Ressler is an artist who is doing projects on various socio-political themes. Further information: www.ressler.net