SOLIDARITY 2.0, OR DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF LIFE

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Biennale Warszawa

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SOLIDARITY 2.0, OR DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF LIFE INTRODUCTION

JAN SOWA

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy has never had so many friends, it might seem. Not only do more countries than ever meet the criteria of parliamentary democracies, but even more or less autocratic regimes—from Putin's Russia to a post-Castro Cuba—feel like they were forced to legitimize power by simulated or limited electoral processes. In other cases, like many African, Asian or Latin American countries, elections serve to lend corrupted oligarchies apparent credibility in the eyes of the population or the international community. Governing politicians in the states where the rules of modern parliamentarism are notoriously violated eagerly invoke the will of the "sovereign" they supposedly repre-

sent, even if they are in fact supported by less than ¼ of the population, as in Poland or Hungary today. Universal will and democratic legitimacy seem fundamental to the socio-political spirit of the age.

On the other hand, reflections on democracy, as well as attempts at its practical advancement, are taking on rather stunted forms to say the least. The liberal center of public debate, being mortally frightened of a populist revolt, remains trapped in the imaginary of the 1990s, when abstractions such as "civil society" or "liberty" were hailed and considered unshakeable foundations of modern politics. Though there is hardly anybody left who believes in Fukuyama's apt phrase about the "end of history", liberal commentators and theorists keep acting as if parliamentary democracy were some timeless Standard Meter of democratic society cast of civic platinum and kept in the political equivalent of the Sevres International Bureau of Weights and Measures. In reality, nothing feeds into the populist-conservative-fascist revolt more than the faults inherent in the political mechanisms of representation, which make large segments of the population feel excluded from participation in our collective political life and extremely disillusioned with the behavior of mainstream politicians. Hence the prevalent anti-establishment mood that is common to populisms of all sorts—from right-wing conservatives to so-called leftist populisms—and its associated tendency to elect those politicians who do not fit in the moderate, "reasonable" format promoted by the liberal center.

But what *is* democracy? We seem to find it easier to employ the word *democracy* in all possible collocations, creating a range of idioms such as "liberal democracy", "radical democracy", "parliamentary democracy", "direct

democracy", "participatory democracy" etc. rather than to answer the question what is democracy in and of itself? Do all those diverse and often contradictory forms of democratic setups share any consistent trait that is strong and meaningful enough be regarded as a common denominator? If so, what could it be? If not, then maybe saying *democracy* without any attribution is just as devoid of meaning and misleading as saying "the wheel" without indicating whether it refers to a locomotive or the steering apparatus of the car?

This book, a summary and outcome of a six-month-long research and discursive cycle that was run by Biennale Warszawa between January and June, 2018, attempts to answer these and other sorts of questions concerning democracy. In addressing them, we have adopted a perspective of distancing from either the political-science or the philosophical approaches to democracy, trying instead to combine both in an understanding that, rather than looking back to its essence and its associated set of standards and values, relies on its practice of organizing our collective life in particular ways. It is a quest to categorize very diverse socio-political practices in a way similar in its spirit to that of Jurgen Habermas in the 1960s, who proposed a new mode of categorizing human knowledge.[1] He focused neither on the research subject proper for the discipline involved, nor on administrative bureaucratic distinctions between disciplines but, in keeping with the spirit of *Praxis* philosophy, started out by simply asking: what particular human interest is addressed by the knowledge in question? Or, to put it differently: why do we want to know what we want to know? What purposes is this knowledge meant to serve? We suggest looking at democracy from that standpoint, or according to that method:

1 See J. Habermas, *Knowledge & Human Interest*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1968.

what aim does a society want to achieve by establishing democratic forms of power? What purpose are they meant to serve? What is the desired societal condition they are hoped to afford us? What form of collective life are they supposed to help us establish?

This kind of approach has several important advantages. It allows us to grasp the unchanging essence of democracy and at the same time understand the diversity of its historical expressions without falling into the traps of metaphysical dogmatism or of a reductionism that sees everything as illusion or ideological deception unless it serves an arbitrarily set purpose. For example, while it is true that in existing liberal-democratic regimes, capital has the power to influence the political process in ways that infringe upon people's sovereignty, dogmatically clinging to the cliché of parliamentary-democratic governments being but a committee managing the collective interests of the bourgeoisie does not allow us to understand many historical phenomena related to electoral politics, such as the fervent struggles of the working class for suffrage, or the undeniable social gains made by that class within the liberal-parliamentary regimes. The gains were, of course, the result of class struggle, but if it was possible to have them while acting within the confines of the parliamentary system, it must have been, at some historical point at least, more than just a plaything of a cynical bourgeoisie.

What could democracy be then as a form of life, or a set of practices, ways of acting and organizations that define us as a collective political subject? If there is a trans-historical and trans-cultural invariant that could be taken as a basis for the answer to this question, it could be the struggle against what Guy Debord once labeled as the oldest of labor divisions: the constant striving to blur the di-

vision of society between the rulers and the ruled. The processual nature of democracy, essential in a thus formulated definition cannot be overestimated. Democracy must not be understood as a particular set of rules that produce predetermined results, no matter where and when they are applied. No particular solution is universally progressive in any context, or can absolutely guarantee a democratic order to be established once and for all. Society is an ongoing dialectic confrontation of groups that, in its course, keep changing and readapting their strategies so as to pursue their key interests in changed contexts. Each particular systemic arrangement—e.g. rule of parliamentary representatives—can be a vehicle of democratization under some socio-historical circumstances, which does not mean it will always continue to be the ultimate embodiment of democratic virtues. If and when it is no longer effective in furthering the strife to blur the division between the rulers and the ruled, and instead becomes a tool for privileged groups to consolidate their position of power—as has largely happened to parliamentarism today—democratic aspirations will have to find new forms and tools of pursuing their goals. Indeed, this state of affairs is well illustrated by the past, as well as the present democratic forms of organization.

FROM DEMOCRACY TO THE RULE OF REPRESENTATIVES…

According to a commonly adopted idea, the origins of our democratic systems can be traced back to ancient Greece where democracy was actually born. After all, its very

name is a combination of two Greek words. This narrative, epic as it may sound, is more of an ideological claim than it has to do with an awareness of the historical variability of democratic organization forms. From a procedural and formal point of view, our democracy actually has nothing in common with what the ancient Greeks practiced.

The first and primary difference between modern and classical democracies lies in the former's absolutely central institution, namely elections. The Greeks knew this possible mode of organizing the power emergence process, but... they deliberately chose against it. That is right—there were no elections in ancient Greece, none of the kind practiced in today's democracies. The most important representative body, equivalent of a present day parliament, which in Athens was known as the Council of 500, was constituted in a completely different way. Its composition was determined by a mechanism of drawing lots, known in political theory as "sortition". Today this sounds like an absurd joke to most people: how could the Greeks, with their sophisticated and great philosophies, base their politics on a sort of lottery?! Yet that is precisely how it was, and, as I said, it was a deliberate and well-reasoned choice on their part, based on a number of well-grounded assumptions. The Greeks believed that, since one essential feature of the democratic order was that every citizen had an equal chance of wielding power, the recourse to an electoral mechanism would have been highly inappropriate. Elections and the unavoidable electoral canvassing are primarily, like any communicative situation, a playing field for individuals gifted with eloquence, apt at convincing or even seducing audiences, as well as having resources enabling them to be more active in promoting

their candidacy. To put it simply, the situation gives one who is rich, attractive and articulate a tremendous advantage over someone who is ugly, poor and stuttering, and the difference has little to do with the rational value of the parties' respective arguments or ideas. People simply have a certain proneness to seduction that cannot be rationally mitigated. For this reason, elections are in fact contests of demagogues; the word, also of ancient Greek origin, describes a person with a gift of enchanting crowds.

The selection of rulers by lottery solves all those problems. Fate, the Greeks rightly believed, is fair in that it favors nobody—everyone has an equal chance of being chosen. Thus, sortition fully satisfies one of the principal democratic qualities that Claude Lefort wrote about: the democratic process—elections in our case, or sortition in ancient Greece—breaks society into an arithmetically defined set of perfectly equal individuals, thus in a sense negating the very nature of society, since it is impossible to conceive a society without hierarchy.[2] What is the advantage of the Greek model? In our system, only active suffrage is subject to such arithmetic egalitarianization: the "one person—one vote" principle means that everyone is equally important in the electoral process, irrespective of his/her position or wealth. However, this is not true about passive suffrage, whose functioning in modern parliamentary regimes, far from being distanced from the social realm, actually remains dangerously interwoven with it: those who are rich, popular or supported by powerful private interests have a greater chance of gaining a seat than those who are poor, looked down on and lacking such support. This particular weakness is one of the forces fueling today's populist reaction in Poland, as well as other places around the world.

2 See C. Lefort, *L'invention démocratique*, Paris: Ed. Fayard, 1981.

Sortition is not, of course, devoid of disadvantages, just like, probably, any system of organized power, it is the domination of one person over another, but I will come back to that later when I try to discuss the existing propositions of the democratization of parliamentary systems. For now, what is more important is the contrast between ancient democracy and present-day political systems that go by the same name. It amounts not only to a paradox, but a great irony of history.

Modern parliamentarism has evolved over ages from the feudal institution of a king's council of advisers (*Curia regis* in Latin) existing in the French and English royal courts. Its genealogy and history of gradual expansion of its powers date back to the 13th century and the *Magna Carta* signed by King John the Lackland in 1215. The first fully formally developed modern representative regime was the United States of America. The American Congress, which convened for the first time on March 3, 1789—while France was still ruled by the *ancien régime*—is the oldest existing modern parliamentary institution in the world. For this reason, it is extremely interesting to trace the debates that accompanied its establishment.

Contrary to what we might think, the enthusiasm of the American elites of the day for democracy, both as a term and as a practice of popular rule, was in fact meagre. In his book on the Occupy Wall Street movement and, indirectly, on democracy itself, David Graeber cites a curious fact: *democrat* was, at the time, an epithet more or less tantamount to today's "populist" and signified a person who favors mob rule, raising popular but irresponsible and dangerous slogans.[3] In fact, the debates in the *Federalist* magazine from the times preceding the establishment of the USA, give plenty of evidence of the Founding Fa-

3 See D. Graeber, *The Democracy Project: a History, a Crisis, a Movement*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013.

thers' unfavorable opinions of democracy. James Madison, for instance, argued:

> … [D]emocracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.[4]

His view was echoed by another American statesman, Alexander Hamilton:

> It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.[5]

In the Founding Fathers' opinion, democracy was not the desired and best possible system. Instead, they advocated

4 J. Madison, ,The Same Subject Continued (The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection)', The Federalist No. 10. I am using the unpaged online edition of The Federalist Papers that can be found at Gutenberg Project websites: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm#link2H_4_0010.

5 A. Hamilton, ,The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection', The Federalist No. 9, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm#link2H_4_0009.

for the republic—a setup whereby the people can influence the composition of the ruling body, but do not wield power themselves. According to Madison, the rule of representatives had an enormous comparative advantage over the rule of the people:

> ... [T]here are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn. In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens, in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind?[6]

It is clear then that parliamentarism, while a revolutionary idea at the time, had from its outset a strong conservative strain, namely the protagonists of the American republic cherished division between the people—*the many*—and the elites—*the few*. Following Madison's proposed deeply paternalistic logic, it is the elites' job to exercise pastoral authority or guardianship over the masses; of course, what was meant was not an absolute dictatorship, but a sensitive care that was to be guaranteed by the mechanism of elections. Yet the element of condescending attitude towards the people can hardly be overlooked in the overall structure. This difference in social ontology translated to

6 J. Madison, ,The Same...'

a difference in the design of political procedures, precisely and openly expressed by Madison when he wrote that a great "difference between a democracy and a republic [is] the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest."[7] A republic is thus characterized by "the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share in the [government]" (emphasis by J.S.).[8]

Such an approach, distancing itself from the ideological fiction in which "elections = democracy", grasps the intrinsically contradictory nature of parliamentarism: its task is to express the idea of the sovereignty of the people—for it is the people who appoint the government—and at the same time to check their aspirations to govern themselves. Parliamentarism, as is often the case with liberal solutions, was a kind of compromise between the conservatism of the aristocratic class, striving to keep the old hierarchies, and the revolutionary impulses of the radicalized masses aspiring for a takeover of power. It was an arrangement where aristocrats were still in power—in the sense of their exclusive right to actually participate in government—but the common man could have a say in who is to become the "aristocrat" for a clearly defined and limited period of time. As any compromise, it had to include elements that were dear to both sides.

This is exactly how parliamentarism is viewed by sober and rational theoretical approaches developed throughout the 20th century, most notably Joseph Schumpeter's concept of competitive leadership and Robert Dahl's polyarchy. According to the former, elections are the moment in time where, as citizens of parliamentary states, we can express our consent to be governed by one group of people

7 Ibid.

8 J. Madison, ,The Senate Continued', *The Federalist* No. 63, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm#link2H_4_0063.

or another.[9] Consent, however, is not the same as will, which we all intuitively feel: to assent to something happening is quite different from actually willing it to happen. At the moment of voting, we only express our consent, not our will. The latter can be expressed, e.g. in a referendums, but not when we delegate the power to make concrete decisions to somebody else. So while democracy is structured on the logic of will, parliamentarism, or the republican system, is constituted by the logic of consent.

Robert A. Dahl's polyarchy concept explains the practical consequences of the inherently contradictory nature of republicanism, namely its attempt to express the will of the people and, at the same time, to keep it in check. The American political scientist believes that republican-parliamentary systems are practically combinations of diverse loci of power—hence the term itself: from Greek—'many', and *arché*—'principle; power'.[10] They do include a democratic element, namely elections, but they also have an element of oligarchy, rule of the rich, which can be seen in the way that big capital influences the political process through lobbying and campaign financing. Furthermore, they comprise an element of aristocracy, for that seems a proper name for the influencing of government policies by institutions and individuals of inherited high status. Examples in Poland are not scarce: it is enough to point to the special position of the Roman Catholic Church. Polyarchy also contains non-democratic components that cannot be readily mapped in traditional categories, such as the political influence of trans-national organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and NATO.

9 See J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942.

10 See R. A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press. 1989, and, by the same author, *On Democracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press. 1998.

The thus outlined brief deconstruction of the republican system is not meant to be its total denunciation as nothing but an ideologically mystified form of class rule. The issue is more complicated and requires differentiation on historical as well as structural levels. First of all, as noted earlier, a form of political organization can be a democratizing factor in a particular historical context, even if it is not exactly an embodiment of democracy as such. For democratization is a process or movement, rather than a fixed condition or situation. Every step along the way from autocracy to democracy is a democratizing movement, and the parliamentarisms of the 18th and 19th centuries were just that. There should be no doubt about it, just as there should be no doubt about the non-democratic, even anti-democratic nature of parliamentarism. This paradoxical quality of parliamentary democracy is no surprise when viewed from a dialectic perspective: it sees historical change as a sequence that always completes itself through social organization forms, which are not only mutually antagonistic, but also fraught with intrinsic contradictions.

Finally, one more historical perspective on parliamentarism is also possible, one that evokes the aforementioned definition of democracy as a process of blurring boundaries between the rulers and the ruled. Modern parliamentarism was initially a movement towards the abolition of that counterposition: it afforded the people new opportunities to influence the government, greatly increasing its scope of sovereignty. Even if it was not complete, the change was big and significant. The same goes for the processes of democratizing autocratic systems today. The problem is that this kind of progressiveness—historical and context-dependent—is never granted once and for all. It is not just about the passage of time; the dialectical

playoff between the ruled and the rulers has all the attributes of an arms race, constantly readjusting its zero point of balance. As frequently happens with living systems—not only human systems—as soon as one side ascertains its advantage thanks to some new solution, the other side learns how to neutralize and offset that advantage, bringing everything back to the starting point. That is more or less the situation right now: parliamentarism, once a progressive form of the people's *empowerment*, has become a plaything of the rich elites, who have found ways to circumvent democratic procedures, thus adding to the oligarchic and aristocratic components of the polyarchies in which we live. An institutional correlate of this is the emergence of a distinct political class, i.e. people who have made ruling their profession, and have not for a long time, or ever, had any job other than sitting in some kinds of authorities. Even a brief look at the Polish political scene is enough to reveal the scale of the problem; it is not in the least associated with just one political option—what Jarosław Kaczyński, Bronisław Komorowski, Donald Tusk, Aleksander Kwaśniewski and the majority of Polish politicians all have in common is the fact that, with the possible exception of some episodes in the 1980s—four decades ago—never in their lives have they actually worked outside the power structures. The same is true about the political classes in most parliamentary democracies around the world. Whatever one may say about this state of affairs, it is hardly a case of a disappearing division between the rulers and the ruled. That division rather seems deeply engrained in the architectures of our political systems. Is it any surprise that populists so frequently and readily challenge the representativeness, and therefore the democratic nature, of these systems?

As if all this were not enough, the same professionalized and alienated political class demonstrates its hopeless ineptitude and dysfunction at every turn. Global climate change is but the most dramatic example of the politicians' inability to solve humanity's pressing problems. They are showing a similar incompetence when it comes, for example, to addressing the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008, still casting a shadow on our present, or to local politics, such as combating smog. Talking about democracy seems a grim joke when decisions on many of the absolutely crucial issues are in no way reflective of society's predominant opinions or values. Even in a nation like Poland, hardly a vanguard of social progress, public opinion is more open-minded and progressive than what the political elites have to offer. There is only one hot topic on which Poles are as conservative as their government: most oppose the admission of refugees. Other than that, none of the follies of either the PiS government or its predecessors would stand the test of popular support and be enacted if Poland were governed by a democratic rule of majority, rather than by a determined and well-organized minority, as presently is the case. A number of opinion polls show that the Polish were in their majority opposed to the logging in the Białowieża Forest, the suppression of the Constitutional Tribunal, the changes to the judiciary system, the evictions during the reprivatisation of municipal buildings and the torture of people in illegal jails run in cooperation with CIA. Most Polish citizens support the idea of driving religion classes out of school to catechetic rooms at churches, and only a radical minority of around 15% believes the anti-abortion regulations should be made stricter. In spite of this, the political class is unable to rise to the challenge of enacting laws that would comply with

majority opinions. In fact, it often acts in direct contradiction to them.

... AND BACK: DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVES TO THE PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

The diagnosis of a crisis of democracy is pervasive today. Equally ubiquitous, however, is an illusion concerning the sources of the crisis. Most commentators seem to believe that its roots are outside the political sphere as such, and are due to some social phenomena: lifestyle transformations, the erosion of civic ethics, passivity on the part of large segments of society, new communication technologies etc. But a sober look at the basic assumptions and the history of parliamentary systems makes it clear that the crisis of representation in contemporary political institutions and their resulting delegitimization are not incidental, but a corollary of the way the very mechanism of representation is structured. The absence of any direct translation between the people's prevailing aspirations and the legislation enacted are a constitutive feature of parliamentarism as the system where, as Madison put it, the power is not held by the people, only by its representatives.

This mechanism of blocking the sovereignty of the people, fundamental for the parliamentary system, and its resulting distortion of representation are exactly what spurs the populist revolt against the system as an aversion towards the political establishment whatever it is, and a search for alternatives. Where a progressive anti-establishment option is available, even in supposedly right-leaning societies, it can gain support from a huge sweep of the

electorate. This was the case in the United States, where an anti-establishment Bernie Sanders had a better chance of beating the anti-establishment Trump than a pro-establishment Hilary Clinton, though probably the most interesting example is what happened in Austria. The winner of the presidential election in 2016 was the Greens' candidate, Alexander Van der Bellen; merely a year later, the chancellor's seat fell to political newcomer Sebastian Kurz, whose ultraconservative Austrian People's Party won the parliamentary elections forming a coalition with the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria, another winner of that election. This astonishing course of events was the result of the logic of the electoral process, and from the way in which mainstream media presented the political axis of contention: when voters had a chance to express their opposition to the establishment by voting for the left, as in the second presidential ballot, they chose the progressive option. However, in the parliamentary elections when the confrontation was along the line liberal center vs. the populist right, they opted for the right, deciding that anything would be better than the continuation of the faceless rule of the (neo-)liberal establishment.

This is one point where the populist stance cannot be contended: the existing political system, particularly its hegemony of the (neo-)liberal-conservative center—again, not an accident, but the result of a deliberate molding of the representation mechanisms—reached their exhaustion. We are in a situation that, after Immanuel Wallerstein, is best described as a point of bifurcation, or choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives.[11] The internal dynamics of the system preclude the *business as usual* continuation, necessitating a sort of radical change. As Slavoj Žižek once put it, the greatest Utopians today—in the sense

11 I. Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

of believing in the absurd—are those who have confidence in in the possibility of the indefinite prolongation of the (neo-)liberal *status quo*.[12] Back in the 1980s they could be convincing us that *There is no alternative*; today that slogan sounds pretty tragicomic, as it is clear that an alternative exists, albeit quite different from the one fiercely combated by the (neo-)liberals over the last decades, so not the radically leftist, but a populist-fascist one. That is no paradox: over the last decades, the liberal center put tons of effort into destroying progressive and emancipatory socio-political alternatives. Even today (*sic!*) one can read in *Gazeta Wyborcza* about Witold Gadomski's anti-welfare rants where redistribution is referred to as "handouts", and an expectation of a fair share in social wealth is equated to "entitlement mentality". Is it any wonder that, upon hearing such insults, huge segments of society who, for example, rely on the 500+ government program,[13] want to kick the table over instead of defending the "formal framework of the system" that for decades had done nothing but disregard their misery, while discursively sanctioning it with the pens of Gadomski and the like?

A possible answer to the populist assault is not a defense of the *status quo ante*, because that is what made the assault possible in the first place. Rather, it must be a progressive alternative. This is what Wallerstein means when he talks about a bifurcation—we are facing a choice: either a progressive movement towards emancipation, equality and democratic empowerment, or a step back to new forms of an autocratic, centralized power restoring the material, symbolic and, extremely importantly, gender hierarchies

12 S. Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, London: Allen Lane 2014.

13 Child bonus introduced in 2015 by the current populist government. It was the first truly redistributive new social measure enacted in Poland after 1989 and allowed a substantial reduction of children's poverty (editor's note).

of the past. Any solution to the complex problems that we are confronting today must itself be complex, but because the deficiencies of *representation* and a sense of exclusion from the decision-making process play a major role in the populist motivations, the core of a progressive response to the populist challenge must include a political component that will ensure better representation, and so more democracy in the political decision making. By and of itself, this is not enough, but its absence would push us more and more towards autocracy.

The debates on democratic alternatives to parliamentarism are accompanied by one fundamental misunderstanding. Critics of radical democracy seem to assume that it is first and foremost about rallies, namely decision-making by assemblies of large masses of citizens. Framing the discussion like this makes it easy to discredit supporters of radical democracy—the idea of making most political decisions in that way is obviously an absurdity. An arrangement of this kind may work in relatively small communities not extending beyond the limits of a small town, but it cannot be a core structure for making larger-scale decisions. Therefore, to understand what radical democracy is really about, we must disavow such absurd notions right at the start. The advancement of democratization does not necessarily lie with literal participation, but with the reforming of the representation mechanism to make it more reliable with regard to representing the opinions, values and norms of a society. This can be achieved in various ways, three of which I will briefly discuss in order to illustrate the general thrust of the radical democracy supporters' thinking.

We are not condemned to starting in a mental void when looking for alternatives to parliamentary politics.

As I mentioned, the ancient Greeks deliberately chose to forego voting in favor of sortition. Their objections towards elections, far from being invalidated, are even more grounded today. Demagogy is among the leading problems of our contemporary politics. Neither the traditional mass communication media nor more recent telecommunication technologies, such as social media, have solved the problem. Indeed, they are exacerbating its hazards. Politics today becomes dissolved in marketing and celebritism, while the costliness of electoral campaigns makes money a major if not the central factor. So it should come as no surprise when suggestions are voiced that replacing the electoral process with a lottery mechanism would be a good way to improve our dysfunctional politics. If representatives are supposed to be representative of a population—and to argue otherwise would undermine the political meaning of the term representation as well as logic itself—then there is no better way of identifying that group than through randomization. This conclusion can be derived, at least, from the fundamental methodology of social science. Therefore, if the actions of authorities in a democratic society are to reflect citizens' opinions, there is no reason why representative bodies could not be constituted by drawing lots. One may object that democracy should also honor the rights of minorities; there is no controversy about that, either: within the broader population, it is not the case that the social majority would rather tyrannize over the minority. We are actually dealing with the opposite: it is minorities—in the sense of the number of voters who support the government in proportion to the population as a whole—that are tyrannizing over the majority, disregarding its rights. Similarly, nothing stands in the way of a radically democratic system

having a constitution, again adopted by majority vote, that would include a deliberate self-limitation of majority rule with regard to the inalienable rights of minorities.

Among the many propositions of restoring the mechanism of sortition into the practice of democracy, the most detailed, and the most interesting one, was raised in the 1980s by Australian philosopher John Burnheim. In his book *Is Democracy Possible?* (1985), he proposes a political system that he calls demarchy, which is "rule of the people" slightly differently phrased.[14] It postulates the makeup of governing bodies at the central level, particularly the national assembly, on a fully random basis. The lottery would involve all those having political rights in a given jurisdiction; if an elected person declined to take a seat in a thus selected "parliament", the replacement would be sought either as a person with the closest sociometric profile, e.g. from within a reserve sample, or through a repeated draw (a procedure used in social studies or polling). In addition, at the local level there would be task groups, also randomly selected, but only from among people who had previously declared an interest in a given subject. These groups would be constructed *ad hoc*, depending on the size of the local population and the issues to be dealt with. In practice, that would mean that each and every one of us would be able to get into the national parliament, and also to indicate several problem areas we would be willing to deal with in task groups, which would also be constituted in a random way. Burnheim goes on to propose the creation of what he calls "second-order groups" whose job would be to scrutinize the whole process from a formal point of view. They would be composed randomly from people who had previously served in the first-order groups, and so have some practical experience and knowledge of the

14 See J. Burnheim, *Is democracy possible?: the alternative to electoral politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985.

system functioning. All the groups at all the levels would be strictly rotational and a person could only sit on them for a limited period before resuming one's previous place in society. Decision-making processes would have to be open, which means that all group sessions would be recorded, and their records publicized (with the obvious exception of special information that is kept secret for operational reasons, such as fighting organized crime etc.). Burnheim postulates the existence of law enforcement forces akin to the police, on the condition that they come under the direct scrutiny of democratic bodies and are rotational as well. Every person would also have recourse to challenging controversial decisions with independent tribunals, thereby achieving the principle of independence of the judiciary.

Introducing demarchy would not mean the abolition of an administrative apparatus similar to the one that is active today. The postulated changes concern *political* institutions, i.e. those that *rule*—making laws, setting budget expenditure priorities, deciding on international alliances and rules of redistributing social wealth etc.—rather than those that *govern*, doing everyday *administrative* work. These issues often get wrongly confused in debates on radical democracy, similarly to the bizarre "dispute" over rallies, mentioned a while ago. It would not be a case of every man or woman having to decide daily on the particular location of parking lots, or how to structure a tender for new bus connections, but of increased influence of the average person on political prioritization: do we want more parking places for individual cars, or perhaps more cycling lanes; do we prioritize individual or collective transportation?

Another proposal, by American computer scientist and inventor David Chaum, also involves lot drawing. It is *random sample voting*, or making decisions on the basis of votes by a random group of people.[15] While its implementation is quite complicated, the main idea is very simple: each time a serious political decision has to be made, a random group of male and female citizens is called forth by lottery—one that is representative for society as a whole; in a Polish setting that would amount to slightly over a thousand people—asking them to vote on the matter in question. It is a fast, cheap and easily performed way of arriving at a voting result similar to that of a national referendum. An analogical line of reasoning stands behind a solution that is already practiced in some places, namely the idea of citizens' panels, or randomly selected groups of citizens whose task it is to discuss a problem and form recommendations concerning relevant legislative changes. It was this kind of group in Ireland that recommended a referendum on the possible removal of the prohibition on abortions from the country's constitution. In Poland, citizens' panels exist in cities such as Gdańsk, where they have some say in local politics.

These kinds of solutions have obvious advantages, such as representativeness, cognitive and ideological diversity of the groups that make decisions (terribly monolithic in present setup, which is one of the reasons for their conservatism as well as dysfunction), far more equal access to the political process than in the case of elections, and so, greater empowerment of the people, reduced corruption and the disintegration of entrenched cliques, the elimination of the low turnout problem, which tends to delegitimize the parliamentary systems of today, and, last

15 D. Chaum, *Random-Sample Elections. Far lower cost, better quality and more democratic*, no specified date or place of publication, https://www.chaum.com/publications/Random-Sample%20Elections.pdf (accessed: April 2019).

but not least, the elimination of "party-cracy" or the situation where an MP is forced to be loyal to his or her party, rather than to his or her voters or to society in general.

No arrangement is free of downsides and demarchic systems would be no exception. The most often raised objection is the risk of governing bodies comprising people who are not best equipped to perform the tasks of ruling. Besides, there is always a certain degree of risk of inadequate representation (accidentality), though this is not much of a problem since procedures exist that can reduce this risk to literally fractions of a percent. Another limitation could be the problem of legitimacy, or justification: why we should obey the power of someone selected by lottery. In addition, a risk sometimes cited is the possible recklessness of those in power, given that the fear of losing a mandate in subsequent elections is eliminated.

There is no space here for detailed polemics, but I want to address these objections very briefly. First of all, we must remember that what matters here is not the assessment of particular ideas of radical democratization in terms of their absolute value and adequacy, but only in comparison with the *status quo*, which itself is highly problematic. Thus the right question is not whether we have invented an ideal, flawless power system, but whether the proposition is or is not better that what we are dealing with at present; "better" meaning one that solves at least some issues better than what we have now, and does not generate more problems. If this is how the question is framed, it is immediately apparent that some of the objections against demarchy apply to parliamentarism to at least the same, if not greater, degree. Whatever can be said about the existing political systems, it is hard to uphold the illusion that the people they bring to power are usually com-

petent, intelligent and of highest ethical standards. Is Donald Trump a wise leader and a good person? Do Victor Orbán or Rodrigo Duterte deserve the title of ethical models? Are the members of our own parliament really the *crème de la crème* of our society? Is Grzegorz Schetyna an exquisite alternative to Jarosław Kaczyński? If the quality (both professional and ethical) of the political class is really our concern, we should be urgently looking for alternatives to the present system, rather than cementing its existence.

The fear of electoral verification is undoubtedly an incentive for our elected representatives to take public opinion into consideration, but in the praxis of parliamentarism, loyalties towards the party, interest groups or sponsors—where the private financing of campaigns is not forbidden—often override the loyalty towards the constituency or the commons.

The most serious of the mentioned problems of demarchy would be the question of its legitimacy, and defending it against attacks based on its randomizing nature ("sweepstake rule"). This, however, just like any problem of ideological essence, can mostly be addressed by adequate discursive work and proper political subjectification. The fact of belonging to a particular ethnic, national or religious group is no less accidental in its nature, and yet, as we all know, the degree of identification with them can be overwhelming. In principle, there is no clear reason why a similar sense of allegiance towards the demarchic system could not be aroused.

I will end this section by describing one more substantial, radically democratic system proposal, namely *liquid democracy*, as developed by the Democracy Earth foundation.[16] It is an idea of combining representation with

16 For the detailed description of that proposition see Democracy Earth, *The Social Smart Contract. An open source white paper*, https://github.com/

more direct forms of political sovereignty, functionally akin to a referendum. In practical terms, it relies on the use of new ICT technologies (the internet and mobile applications), essentially breaking the relation of representation and making it conditional. Under liquid democracy, we would have the possibility of transferring our decision-making power to somebody else, but also of revoking our representation if we found that the person is not acting in accord with our own outlook, or if a particular issue is so important to us that we would rather express our stance on it directly. So, it would be a mechanism of both appointing and revoking our representatives that makes sure that they truly represent our opinion. In addition, we would have a chance to delegate different representatives on different issues or problem areas to be dealt with—for example, we could delegate our vote in matters of ecology to one person, and our representation when it comes to the school system or international politics, to others. That would certainly make the representation process more efficient and eliminate the problem we occasionally face: I would vote for politician X, because he or she is an expert in this or that matter, but I cannot accept his or her stance on religion, the European Union, or judiciary system. In a liquid democracy, no such dilemma would exist.

This overview contains only some of presently emerging specific ideas on how parliamentarism can be democratized. Each of them is inspiring, though they also need to be approached with caution; not because their underlying concepts or postulates are objectionable, but because only practice can be the final proof of their value. Politics is no academic debate, but a practical enterprise of deliberately shaping our human (and, to an ever increasing degree, non-human) ways of being together. Theoretical

DemocracyEarth/paper/raw/master/The%20Social%20Smart%20Contract.pdf [accessed in May 2019] (editor's note).

debates are needed and useful, but praxis will always be the ultimate horizon of verification. It also belongs to our constitution as human beings that we best master practicalities while acting. Therefore, to make ideas such as those mentioned above work, we would have to start putting them into practice, watching the outcomes and correcting the shortcomings as we detect them. Of course, it is unthinkable to completely change as complex a system as the state overnight. What seems much more sensible is to first test the alternatives on a smaller scale, such as a town or a district. Nothing should prevent us from starting to decide on a more democratic basis what is to happen in our street, district or little town. Enriched with this experience, we could then gradually transform the general shape of our politics, by building new and larger structures on a democratic foundation of smaller ones, as envisioned, for example, by Murray Bookchin.[17]

DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF LIFE

The book we are presenting to our Readers is the result of a six-month-long series of lectures and debates held by Biennale Warszawa, as previously noted, from January through June 2018. Our starting point was the Self-Governing Republic program developed by Solidarity in 1981.[18] Today it has been mostly forgotten, and the present-day Solidarity union is rather a parody, not a continuation, of that organization: while the former was a vanguard of

17 Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) was a social theorist and activist, taking part in the anarchist movement for most of his life, though broke up with it in his later years. Bookchin was a pioneer of critical urban studies and ecology, propagating the idea of bottom-up democratic federalism, that is being put into practice by the Kurdish movement nowadays. Dilar Dirik speaks on that relation in the interview printed in this book. See also M. Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, Oakland: AK Press, 2006.

thinking for a new and progressive world, the Solidarity of today is obsessively defending the world of old privilege, such as the clergy's impunity in sexual abuse of children, as we witnessed when Solidarity activists hurried to defend the monument of the pedophile priest Henryk Jankowski in Gdańsk.

The perspectives from which we looked at democracy in that series of multiple events was founded on its understanding not as a certain set of ideas, but as a form of life. Regardless of the institutional and historical contexts in which this form appears, it has three basic general characteristics. First of all, it is collective: democracy is not a means to pursue private interests, but a collective practice of concern about common goods. Secondly, democracy means egalitarianism, i.e. equal participation of each person in all procedures concerning power. Thirdly, democracy is a communicative process and, wherever it appears, it takes the form of debate and an exchange of arguments and opinions between the parties involved.

These three qualities drove our choice of subjects and problems we dealt with over the six months in 2018, and consequently, they also determined the contents of this book, which consists of conversations with activists and researchers involved in the series. The selection is neither systematic nor representative of the wide range of contemporary self-organized and democratic initiatives. As the curator of the series and editor of this collection, I was primarily concerned with demonstrating the historical, geographical, cultural and "sectoral"—in the sense of encompassing diverse areas of social life—diversity of such practices.

18 There is no space here for a detailed analysis of the ideas of that original Solidarity union, nor is it necessary, for the issue has been addressed by us in the past. See e.g. J. Sowa, *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa. Widma przeszłości, wizje przyszłości (Another Commonwealth Is Possible: Specters of the Past, Visions of the Future)* Warsaw: WAB, 2015; or the play *Solidarność. Nowy projekt (Solidarity: A New Project)* directed by Paweł Wodziński at Teatr Polski, Bydgoszcz, 2017.

The book opens with a conversation with Monika Kostera, researcher and theorist of management, who conducts systematic empirical research on cooperatives and other self-organized enterprises. It introduces an axiological perspective to the debate on democratic self-organization by pointing to the desalinating dimension of this type of practice, a possible antidote for all-pervasive cynicism.

The conversation with Ukrainian historian Dmytro Stasiuk, which follows, takes us on a journey through history, back to the time of the October Revolution, when a group of anarchist activists in the steppes of South-Eastern Ukraine started one of the greatest experiments in building democratic and horizontal power structures on a state-like territorial scale in known history. This is an important case in the debate on what is or is not possible when it comes to the practical viability of anarchism. Interestingly, it also illustrates the huge potential for self-organization in rural areas, contrary to the common belief in a reactionary and conservative character of rural life, which is typically contrasted with the inherently progressive nature of urban areas.

Similarly surprising examples in this respect can be found in the interview with Kurdish sociologist and activist Dilar Dirik. She talks about a fascinating experiment initiated by Kurdish men and women in North Syria, who are building a stateless autonomy, supplementing officially existing power structures with their own parallel organs of democratic self-organization. This is a perfect illustration of what Deleuze might call the rhizomatic and nomadic character of a horizontal self-organization that, rather than opposing state authority head-on, sinks through its cracks like sand pouring through gaps in a palisade.

Another interview takes us back to the current and

familiar context of the Białowieża Forest, being destroyed by Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) administration. Joanna Pawluśkiewicz and Jakub Rok of the Camp for the Forest tell us about their struggles against the loggers and authorities, local and central, but also against themselves, which is about the difficult yet deeply rewarding process of organizing the Camp. The conversation shows that the only way to master the art of self-organization is to practice it, since theoretical deliberations often miss the point when it comes to identifying practical challenges. Contrary to what one might expect, the most difficult problem in the day-to-day operation of the Camp was how to deal with... domestic animals and their presence at the Camp.

The conversation with Georg Blokus, theater director and activist from Cologne, moves us to a completely different sociological context, into the field of cultural institutions. Referring to his involvement in the leadership of the School of Political Hope, a self-organized initiative of education and activism, Blokus identifies both the threats and the opportunities related to these kinds of initiative. He also diagnoses the significant point of transition we are at, when the paradigm of participatory art, or art activities that include the audiences while remaining within the transmitter-institution—receiver-participant model, gives way to organizational art, which attempts to use the potential and resources of cultural, especially public, institutions to create real world mechanisms for solving specific, practical problems. This perspective is important for the whole Biennale Warszawa as an institution that would like to engage in this way in processes playing out in all sorts of contexts and scales—from town to global level.

The interview with Monika Płatek deals, at the spe-

cific level, with what could be seen as a more democratic and community-based approach to administering justice and resolving conflicts around law-breaking, the so-called restorative justice. On a more general level, however, the focus is on something fundamental to any kind of democracy, namely communication and negotiations between frequently antagonistic groups and individuals. The process of negotiating a settlement between the sides of a conflict can therefore be seen as a laboratory of communicative rationality allowing solutions to be arrived at that are beneficial to as many people as possible. This deliberative-communicative aspect of horizontal self-organization is extensively discussed, for example, by David Graeber in his book on democracy mentioned above.

The final conversation involves Maria Świetlik and Marcin Koziej, both engaged in the free software movement and working for a reform of copyright laws aimed at more open and less restrictive models. Within the digital domain, the recent decades have seen significant trends of democratic, horizontal self-organization on the one hand, and top-down control and surveillance on the other. Generally speaking, the technological problem cannot be overestimated in the whole democratic endeavor, not because technology is supposed to automatically create a better and more just world—as critics of the thesis of a progressive potential of new technologies mockingly suggest—but because any social machinery requires an substructure of specific material machines, which in this case primarily means machines that enable remote communications for the exchange of ideas and debates between people who might never have a chance to meet physically. This seems an absolute priority in today's world of great complexity and planetary scale.

While the overall picture emerging from these conversations is probably utopian, in the sense of proposing a fundamental and comprehensive reorganization of our social world, it is not painted in naïve pink. One recurrent motif in many of the interviews is the problem of lacking resources for self-organization, especially the shortage of free time. It is clear that the form of life that capitalism imposes on us is difficult to reconcile with substantial involvement in collective affairs. Parliamentarism has the advantage of fitting well with the realities of life in a capitalist world, where overwork is a common experience for most of us—just drop a piece of paper into a box once every four years, and you are a good citizen. A greater degree of involvement would require having more free time, and that would necessitate a major transformation in the economic-material realm. Something like a guaranteed minimum income seems a necessary precondition of these kinds of reform.

As we can see, we are largely looking towards a post-capitalist horizon, and my interlocutors are often clear about that. Here we are banging against a wall, the kind we know from a number of other situations, like when the impending ecological doom is discussed: capitalism appears to be more and more incompatible not just with progress, but with the very survival of humanity. The fundamental choice we are facing is one more piece of evidence that the (neo-)liberal *status quo* cannot be sustained: the time for revolution—or reaction—is approaching. Which form it takes is up to us.

Translated by Paweł Listwan

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MONIKA KOSTERA *SURVIVING* INTERREGNUM

JAN SOWA: There are at least two perspectives on self-organized initiatives, each including one of their aspects. There's the pragmatic-practical one, i.e. the question of their effectiveness, and there is also the ethical or axionormative aspect: how they affect our system of values and what norms they bring with themselves. I'd suggest we focus on the latter, given the approach you suggest in your book *Occupy Management: Inspirations and Ideas for Self-Organization and Self-Management*[1], and because of what you said in your lecture in Biennale Warszawa in June 2018.

You spoke of cynicism permeating our reality; on the one hand, we constantly hear declarations and stories of various lofty ideas—democracy, participation, justice, freedom, human dignity, etc.—while on the other, we continually come up against fundamental flaws in the practice regarding those values: business greed, selfishness of politicians, abuse by the clergy, etc. It is terribly disheartening and destroys morale. It is hard to believe anything and construct any kind of ethos in such a situation. I'd like to ask you how self-organization can be helpful in this case, and in what situations can it help us to shed this widespread cynicism?

1 See M. Kostera, *Occupy Management: Inspirations and Ideas for Self-Organization and Self-Management*, Routledge, New York 2014.

MONIKA KOSTERA: I'd like to touch on a few things. Firstly, to slightly object to the use of the word "cynicism"; not on my account, but on my colleague's, who always tells everyone off for using this word, because it is the name of a very noble current in philosophy [laughs]. We're referring to the popular use of that word, though. I understand this perfectly and totally agree with you. There's something even more serious about it; this popular cynicism is a reaction devoid of any philosophy, an emptiness or vacuum. Something is missing and I'd say that what we need now are structures and institutions that make social collaboration possible. The area I'm interested in is the aspect of organiza-

tion at a middle, rather than at macro or micro levels—the meso level. There we can see the disintegration of a whole range of social structures and institutions, which makes any type of collaboration, organization and collective creation extremely difficult. Essentially, we have to discover America every time we do something in this field. No one can be bothered or is able to do it, or they lack patience, so—more often than not—it is done forcefully; hence the popularity of autocratic and violent solutions. If nothing can be foreseen or supported by structure, yet you want results, then violence seems to be the solution, albeit a treacherous and destructive one, as it leads to a total annihilation of any remaining structure and the erosion of social trust. Then nothing can be done and there is no hope of it ever being possible.

Where I see hope for the meso level are the utopias that Zygmunt Bauman wrote extensively about. It's not that I want to save the world of organizations or management through those utopias, or that I have yet another utopic idea that will work miracles when put into practice. I see the mere *idea* of utopia as useful. We ought to believe in something. For example, many theorists and practitioners of management currently believe in the idea called "Teal Organization" put forward by Frédéric Laloux, the Belgian coach and a former employee of the consulting firm McKinsey & Company. It consists in a comprehensive approach to management, respecting certain elements of a democratic decision-making process and rejecting the reliance on planning and hierarchy. I personally find teal organizations quite irritating when sold as a universal remedy; particularly because they change nothing in the ownership structure. They are merely a nod towards democracy, not a genuine one; a kind gesture in the best case—an empty one in the worst. I certainly sympathize with people having this idea in the back of their minds. It is a utopia and people need those in order to mobilize, hold each other's hand and get through this vacuum together; we do need to get through this lack of structures and institutions to the other side of what Zygmunt Baumann calls the "interregnum" after Gramsci. It is unbelievably difficult; hence we stand to choose between a negative solution, i.e. violence and the brutal destruction of what is left over, or a positive one, which means building utopias on the meso level.

J S: I'm not sure if all our readers will be familiar with this jargon. Let's define this "meso" level you speak of.

Does it refer to organizations such as political parties, trade unions or companies?

MK: It does. The boundaries of this level are of course quite blurred, which is a good thing because it makes it more interesting. It encompasses everything that falls between the wide macro level—studied by such disciplines as sociology, political science, economics, macroeconomics—and the micro level, which refers to individuals and small groups such as a family or a group of friends. It involves even the smallest of companies, as well as global corporations such as, pardon me, Coca-Cola or—to be less unpleasant—Greenpeace.

JS: We went through an enthusiastic axiological revival in the 1990s; another wave of democratization, increased freedoms in the eastern bloc, the end of the Cold War, i.e. the end of the nuclear threat. For us today, that post-war period seems like science fiction, as nowadays we dread the terror of harmful chemicals in our food, but from the 1950s to the 1980s people lived under a constant threat of nuclear war. This has been dealt with, at least for the moment. We seem to be enjoying a more stable and even perhaps a slightly more progressive period. I'm being a bit provocative, because I obviously agree with your crisis diagnoses, but where did this erosion of the normative area come from, do you reckon? I also have a feeling we're suspended in an awful hypocrisy where you constantly come across a dual narrative. A bit like the delegitimization of the late Polish People's Republic.

MK: Exactly. I have this sense of *déjà vu* all the time.

JS: Exactly! All those pundits saying we're doing fine—we all know it's not the case, but anyway, it's repeated so many times that it becomes a hollow phrase, impossible to believe. Where do you think this comes from now? In the case of the People's Poland it's easier to understand. Not only for us who sort of remember it, but also from a systemic point of view.

MK: It is precisely the same thing. Let me suggest two great books. One is *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* by Alexei

Yurchak. Even though it actually focuses more on the macro level, it is incredibly inspiring and shows a similar systemic decline. The other one, written in the late 1980s, deals with the meso level and is about management: Krzysztof Obłój's *Zarządzanie ujęcie praktyczne* [Eng. *Management: A Practical Approach*—editor's note]. In this book, he shows how various structures and their mechanisms fell into a downward spiral. Whenever a problem arises in a system, the response is to intensify actions in that area; if planning is the problem—more planning is applied; if regulation is wrong—more of it is implemented. It shows that the system has lost its capacity for self-regeneration or self-renewal. If that's the case, it probably means it is dying. The book was published in 1986 and the author was right. The book was actually more right than the author, who hadn't foreseen it at all. It didn't occur to him. The book was simply a reflection on different things happening around him. He would never have called it that.

JS: He didn't know that he knew, to put it psychoanalytically, Žižek-style. That is exactly the problem with late capitalism; it is evident that an unregulated market, low taxes and commodification are leading us nowhere, and yet every five minutes one pundit or another will try to convince us that capitalism is the best system in the world, and that we "can't turn back the clock of history", or that what we are dealing with in Poland are the remnants of so-called communism. So, on one side it's a dysfunctional system that doesn't work, and on the other—a ban on thinking about an alternative.

MK: Krzysztof Obłój described the decline of the management system in organizations in the People's Poland in that way; and it actually happened. They may have had thousands of other advantages, but they were unable to self-regenerate. I see the same thing right now. I have this constant déjà vu.

When the Thatcherite slogan "There Is No Alternative" was coined, it essentially meant a death sentence for the system, which—at the same time—was pronouncing its immortality and divinity. Now it's too late to simply fix it, which is evident in mainstream management. Even though it tries to absorb alternative ideas—the above-mentioned teal management, for in-

stance—it cannot. It is no longer capable. These ideas function solely as a symbol; as something people can believe in; but—in reality—teal organization cannot be implemented without completely demolishing the system, because for people to function in a validated way, with loyalty and dedication, they'd need to be made co-owners of the company. That's it. It can't be done in any other way. Everything else is deception.

JS: I was just thinking about that. I'm looking at it from a Marxist point of view, in which the matter of ownership is everything, but I wouldn't want to force a judgment based on a given social ideology or ontology. The same thing can be said in a much simpler way, because every axiological horizon, if it is to be valid, must somehow relate to the practice of everyday life. For how long can I trick myself into identifying with an organization that isn't mine so I don't have any control over what goes on there? How am I to tie my professional career and biography with a given organization if I'm alienated from it? It does not seem to be only a crisis within a given framework that can be remedied, but rather a crisis of the whole framework of reference. We are constantly subjected to a kind of alienation and expropriation.

MK: Unfortunately, all the solutions to motivate and encourage people to participate and collaborate are adopted with the aim of depriving them of self-agency and deepening their alienation. This simply leads to what you said before—the impression that something's seriously wrong, that the whole thing is plain hypocrisy. Even though this is not intentional, as I believe that many people putting forward these types of solution and singing their praises may be convinced about them and want to defend capitalism. I know quite a few of them who genuinely believe in capitalism and hope all problems can be dealt with within its framework. Perhaps in the 1990s, such solutions in the management area would still have been possible, as long as different alternatives had been taken seriously. I don't see it as plausible now, as the deterioration is in full swing on one side, and on the other, huge efforts are made to concentrate power and property. Such a fusion of ownership and power happens outside the managerial sphere. A manager is no longer an interme-

diary, but rather another alienated renter, just like everyone else, except that they are being paid astronomical sums for their alienation. The principle is roughly the same. I can't see any way to prevent this mechanism within the current framework, i.e. by reforming capitalism. I do see an alternative to it, though: post-capitalism based on an egalitarian distribution of all kinds of resources, with a much greater participation in ownership of the average person, thus in the related decision-making processes, and focused more on what is common. It is another utopia, but since it has quite a pleasant tradition and it also proves possible in the alternative organizations I'm studying, I enjoy believing in it. The normative aspect you mentioned at the beginning is part and parcel of it.

At the beginning of the 1990s in our country, Aleksander Chrostowski researched organizations whose operations lean towards this model. Among others, he looked at a large, formerly state-owned service company following the principles we're interested in; namely, the common good principle. He studied it using the action research methodology, having been asked to help consolidate democratic decision-making processes in the company. The ultimate goal was to make the workers participate in ownership—it was meant to be joint property. They worked together on it. These are very long-term processes. Curiously, the company was actually quite profitable. Later on, the experiment was interrupted because the company was bought by a foreign investor who shattered everything that had been built up over the years. The management was fired, others left voluntarily. The project ended in failure but the records remain, as well as the ideals and the blueprint of how to go about it. Not necessarily a co-op, as the organization does not have to be small. It could be a sort of corporation. The company in question actually was a corporation and yet it proved possible there. I think this model can work on different levels, as long as it's implemented in a consistent way—all the way from the issue of ownership, through structures, shared management to ethical values. If there is room for such constructs, it could turn out to be a workable utopia, somewhere on the other side of that interregnum.

J S: I'd now like to focus on the idea of interregnum as a transition period. I actually think you're talking about issues similar to those that interested the North American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein. His ap-

proach was focused on macro structures, the largest systems—the world of economy, macro politics, etc. Since the mid-1990s, Wallerstein has argued that we are nearing the end of a cycle, after which a reconfiguration is inevitable. Old structures will cease to be efficient and we are at a point of bifurcation, in that there are two possible alternatives in the sociopolitical development. We can either push the system towards further democratization, the strengthening of world order and peaceful collaboration; or the opposite will happen, a sort of regress: global remilitarization, the decay of structures for international collaboration, a return to *Realpolitik*, which we know from before the existence of the UN. When looking at the current crisis, we actually see the latter dangerous option coming closer and closer. A thing that was considered mere speculation ten or fifteen years ago—that reactionary political mobilization could occur—is practically now happening before our eyes. The supporters of this autocratic, centralist and backward-looking movement are turning their reactionary utopia into reality. One more reason for us to have an alternative one.

MK: It unfortunately does look that way. What you describe as a reactionary utopia, Zygmunt Baumann described as retrotopia.

JS: Yes, and we see these retrotopias all the time. *Make America Great Again* gloats about the illustrious past. The campaign for Brexit is saturated with a nostalgia for former glory.

MK: I write about these phenomena in the context of the interregnum metaphor in my latest book, *After the Apocalypse*, and I use a figure that complements that metaphor, namely the sociological apocalypse. On a meso level it seems, precisely, as if the structures are falling apart, everything is crumbling into dust and our vision is blurred by the dust left after the structures and institutions of the past. That is one aspect of the apocalypse: destruction. The other is, as the name indicates, the revelation. The apocalypse means that things are now revealed that were invisible before, covered by the build-up of structures and institutions. Now that everything is crumbling, we see what is be-

neath, and what we see is terrifying—violence, control and other horrors that are now in plain sight, whereas before we could not see them, even though they were there. Capitalism has never been a perfect world, so my analysis is devoid of nostalgia like "Oh, it is falling apart, but it used to be so wonderful!" Things were the same, it is just that many of them were invisible. By "the same", I mean all the horrors such as exploitation, alienation, the destruction of the environment, etc. All these are intrinsically linked with capitalism.

Social institutions—as the new institutionalism theory teaches us—should be built on common values, on things that bring us together, such as a common vision and utopias—why not? It just has to be something that will bind people strongly enough for them to want to take up the challenge of building a new world. I put forward that the search for values starts on the meso level. We need to try, as those values are there somewhere, they have just been covered with all that dust around us...

JS: Like smog.

MK: Yes, terrible smog. But the seeds of values are hidden somewhere beneath it. I strongly suggest seeking them out and taking great care of them so that we have a foundation on which to build new structures and institutions. So that we do not have to go back into the caves or reach a point where nothing works except the military. So that we don't have to start all over again. Another utopia emerges here, the one of the common good that has survived for so many years. Parts of it can be seen where there's a bit less smog.

JS: So we should see two sides to utopia, shouldn't we? On one side it is a practical vision of specific organizations, and on the other it is another name for a certain system of values we adhere to, namely this axiological horizon to organizations and actions you are speaking of.

MK: Definitely. Different alternative organizations are looking for a space where they could operate outside the system. Many of the organizations that I studied declare explicitly—and without me prompting them—that they operate outside the capitalist system. They go out of their way to avoid contact with capi-

talism. It burdens them, drives them under, and makes everyday operations difficult, but they do the most they can to escape it.

JS: I see it as a noteworthy declaration, even if they cannot fully live up to it, as it clearly shows what this axionormative horizon is about: sometimes you cannot just leave capitalism behind, but if it were up to you, you would do everything outside of it, that is how much you dislike it.

MK: Yes, you look out the window and dream that it is a bit different out there, a bit better, and you try to live as if you were already there.

JS: I'd like to make our conversation a bit more tangible by referring to the current sociopolitical situation. During the recent Yellow Vest (gilets jaunes) protests in France, a whole list of their various expectations and aspirations was formulated. It was very interesting because it resembled the 21 demands in the Gdansk Shipyard in August 1980. There were very specific issues, for instance regarding the fuel tax, but the protesters also articulated very important systemic demands. Two of them seem to be particularly relevant in terms of de-alienation and increasing control of the world we live in. Namely, the reduction in the number of signatures required to hold a national referendum. The strikers want it to be around 700,000, whereas in France at the moment this number is approximately 4.5 million. Another demand was for the right to dismiss elected representatives.

I see it as a reaction to that deep cynicism permeating our political life. In an election campaign a politician will promise you the world, but when they come into power they start to retract—everything becomes unfeasible, this marvelous vision falls apart and the voter is left with the feeling they have been duped yet again: I trusted them, I went and voted, I thought it was going to be different, but here we go again. You can, of course, object to it by not voting for them in four years' time, but by then they will have had the time to botch up so badly it will be too late. A clear example is the environmental policy: we can dismiss

this government this year[2] as the elections are near, but all those trees that they felled will take 50 or 100 years to grow back. All of this makes you feel a mixture of exasperation and powerlessness. It is an extremely unpleasant state, both psychologically and in terms of values.

[2] The interview was conducted in early 2019 (editor's note).

MK: It does, unfortunately, resemble the current prevalent management styles perfectly—narcissistic and based on insincere relationships with people. One side simply seduces the other and misleads them—you can say virtually anything, as words do not matter so much. Hence the isolation of the elites from us, average Janes and Joes, who have to live in a world built for them. We are dealing here with the consumer-commodity type of relation rather than a genuine social connection built overtime where both sides have their obligations, where trust exists because everyone is accountable for their actions. Hence the feeling of powerlessness and frustration because it is indeed a system devoid of self-agency and trust, misleading and deceitful. Of course, nothing can be achieved like this. The only thing to do is to continue destroying it all, disarming and taking it apart. Trees are not the only ones to be felled; structures meet a similar fate and it is hard to tell if we will rebuild them in 50 or 200 years. Academic institutions for instance—what can be done with them?

Speaking of the demands of the Yellow Vest movement, we had similar ones in our June 2018 protest of university workers and students; the difference was that we organized ourselves face to face in a physical location, so the movement goes on and exists, unlike those organized online, which are transient, sudden and short-lived. We demanded democratization and authentic professional autonomy in academia, a stop to the neoliberal takeover of academic institutions and their *de facto* destruction, which is true in many countries where such reforms were implemented years ago. Higher salaries and more funding for science and scientists are, of course, necessary as a lack of funding is the principal problem of Polish science, not our absence from rankings, which are a tool used by the powerful marketing apparatus of giant companies and corporatized Western universities. We also called for academia to be opened up to an ethos, a vocation and genuine engagement and com-

mitment. So, they were both tangible issues as well as a need for some kind of direction, being able to get out of this omnipresent rush towards decay.

JS: Let me play the devil's advocate and ask you why self-regulation should be the cure for all those gripes. Even if we agree on the diagnosis of a crisis, one narrative in the public debate, strongly favored by the liberal center, is that we need new leaders. In this approach, the burnout of leadership is to blame for our problems. Its supporters were very happy to see Macron elected in France, for instance. He was supposed to be this outstanding leader who would protect us from the menace of populism, and the left was supposedly unable to deal with it as it had no leader and it became bogged down in all those debates about self-organization and horizontality. You put forward a different solution. What are its advantages? What arguments would you use in such a discussion?

MK: On the meso level, where the organizational and management mechanisms that I study are operating, the figure of a leader and the functioning of leadership have been totally demolished by an endless array of sycophants and sociopaths. This has been happening for quite some time. There is nothing left to work with. We should be extremely wary of people who claim they have something to offer in the framework of leadership. It just simply no longer works, it is in ruins. It may be rebuilt someday. Let us compare Dag Hammarskjöld,[3] for instance, with any given Macron of today. A time will probably come for a new Hammarskjöld or Gandhi—great visionaries. If Gandhi is not to someone's liking, it could also be a visionary without underlings, such as William Blake. A time may come for figures who will come to light for some reason, who will show others the way. But for the time being we should not seek them out, we ought to steer clear of this most toxic and deteriorated figure in organizations that I know of.

Common effort, democracy, self-organization and the building of mutual trust are a must. We can rely on each other on equal terms, based on an exchange, a sort of equivalence of expectations. Like building castles in the air. As long as it works, we should stick to it until we are able to look around and say

3 Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjöld (1905—1961) was a Swedish diplomat and politician. He was trained as an economist and lawyer, between 1953 and 1961 he held the position of Secretary General of United Nations. He is recognized for his role in solving the Suez crisis in1956. He died in an airplane crash on the territory of what is now Zambia in 1961. He was honored posthumously with the Nobel Peace Prize (editor's note).

where we are, under what circumstances and what possibilities we have of building something larger. None for now.

JS: If I'm right in linking this with what you said before, it is about more than just the stories of social capital and trust that we know from the 1990s. You mentioned ownership before. I'm not sure if you will go along with that, but I see these matters—trust and ownership—as intrinsically linked. The need for mutual trust alone will not be enough, as it is hard to confide in anything when there is no specific control mechanism, something which could guarantee shared ownership and management.

MK: As my accounting professor friend says, if we cannot check someone's books, we should not trust them. If we cannot hold the management system accountable, under no circumstances are we to trust it. It is not just individual madness, but in the long run it will prove harmful for the entire social condition. Such an organization cannot develop correctly. Trust is an integral part of building relationships within an organization, thus nothing can be built without shared ownership. There has to be some common ground, a foundation to run on. Ownership makes for quite a strong foundation.

JS: That is true, and liberals will not need any convincing about that, surely. It is quite clear to them too that ownership alone enables control and makes it possible to govern something.

MK: That is also classic Karl Marx. A point they see eye to eye on.

JS: True. I actually think that Marx and liberalism have more points in common than liberals would like to admit. The difference is Marx goes a step further, he sees the limitations and his discourse does not have blind spots, unlike with the liberals. The same refers to the pointless discussion on "collectivism vs. liberalism". An argument often emerges that capitalism gives us autonomy and individual freedom, whereas what Marxists offer is a vision of enslavement by the collective. This could not be more wrong, as Marx repeatedly says that the final dimension by which we can judge a system is individual autonomy, the capacity to

grow, using the creative abilities, etc. Marxism indeed contains that affirmation of individualism and personal dignity, but it recognizes that without shared ownership of the means of production, all this will be a luxury, available to the chosen few. Like Hegel, you can revel in the heaven of abstraction and talk about dignity or recognition, but ultimately those who do not own anything will eventually be deprived of dignity. The precariousness that we are headed towards is a clear example of that, and I also see it as direct proof of growing cynicism and discouragement, which we discussed earlier. How am I to identify with society in which my future is increasingly uncertain?

MK: This is the area where the theory of organization and management can play a constructive part, because a solid theory thereof takes into account various dynamic aspects in connection with others. You cannot organize people using only collectivism. If collectivism exists, it is most effective to see it as a process, complemented and supported by individualism. A question arises how these two processes relate to each other. Where can we combine them and where ought they to be separate? What are the consequences of that? Hence it is clear to me these aspects cannot be treated in isolation. It is technically possible, but it will not lead to any constructive alternative. Such an alternative must have a complex, multi-faceted nature; otherwise it will be inoperative right from the start.

JS: I would like end by touching on another crucial matter that concerns the relationship between the meso, macro and micro levels. At the micro level—social relations and friendships, for instance—I think that people spontaneously settle into a form of democracy and egalitarianism. If you have a group of friends where one or two people feel constantly subordinate, because the group never does what they suggest or they are not respected, they will eventually abandon this group. Those who are leave feel quite comfortable with each other, can come to an agreement and find some common ground. Above it is the meso level, where the capacity for egalitarian self-organization has been proven many times. There is a lot of litera-

ture on the subject which proves that it is not only right, but also efficient. A question arises, however, about the relationship between the meso and macro levels; it seems absolutely vital from a political point of view. I sometimes come across arguments against the regime of the commons, in the spirit in which Aristotle wrote about friendship: it is essentially a relationship permeated by communism—as we would call it today because of its egalitarianism and the importance of sharing—but how many friends can you have? You cannot be friends with all of humanity. Following this argument, solutions that work at the meso level are inapplicable to a higher level, so they cannot be an inspiration for organizing the broadest political level. What is your take on that? How realistic is it to apply some practices from the meso to the macro level? Is it at all possible?

MK: I do not know, to be honest. I think interesting proposals are being put forward by urban researchers such as Krzysztof Nawratek, with his radical urban inclusiveness. It sounds fascinating, but what are the consequences of it and could it be implanted at a higher level? Or would a common good state be a radical democracy? Maybe, I cannot tell.

JS: Do you think a city is a good testing ground for that? Or should we try it at a company and trade union level? Are city-level political structures possible to take over? Because it is hard to imagine a situation where there is shared ownership and democracy in a company, but alienation and autocracy at state level.

MK: That would be extremely unpleasant.

JS: As well as bizarre and unstable in the long run; it is either one or the other.

MK: I truly do not know. I would love to read something about that that could convince me that such a transfer from the meso to the macro level is feasible. I am afraid a sort of coevolution would be necessary. Something must happen globally. Zygmunt Bauman also wrote that we are waiting for some institutions and global structures to materialize and become a foundation

for building not only economic relations, but also democratic ones on a global scale. Then an alignment will occur between all those alternative organizations and the global structures that will support the former. The organizations—or rather the organizers—I work with articulate this as well: "If only the state would support us. It would be so nice and easy if such mechanisms emerged." I guess we are waiting for something like that.

JS: Murray Bookchin's ideas come to mind.[4] Do you reckon believe they would be the way?

4 See footnote 17 in the Introduction and the interview with Dilar Dirik in this volume (editor's note).

MK: I was just thinking if they could.

JS: I guess Bookchin reasons in that way: at the bottom—in districts and cities, i.e. meso-level institutions which that we can control—we have got radically democratic organizational procedures. Then, through cross-linking them, we try to generate a higher level where they are able to coordinate with each other, and communicate. It is quite clear to me that if we do not want to go back into the caves, metaphorically speaking, we need to take hold of the highest level. At the moment, the organization of human life is so complex on a global scale that if we want to keep our lifestyle, we need to find an alternative idea for global human existence.

MK: Yes. We actually have all the pieces of the puzzle, but we aren't able to put them together. It's a valid idea but for this dynamic to work, there needs to be a framework. Some sort of Democratic United Nations must exist, or a European Union which would working towards adapting political institutions to the needs of the people rather than those of capital. There have to be legal institutions which that protect worker and citizen rights.

JS: Of course, so we must think about it on many levels. This makes for a good ending to this conversation as some sort of an introduction. We will not, of course, settle all the issues. I think we are standing at a threshold, the question is how to cross it. If we believe in self-organization and collective action, we need to come to terms with the fact that no one will

bring a ready-made solution in a briefcase and announce: “That is how we will do it!”

MK: Agreed, that would be pretty bad. We need to think and try.

Translated by Artur Kociałkowski

AN INTERVIEW WITH DMYTRO STASIUK

MAKHNOVSHCHINA — THE ARCHEOLOGY OF SELF-ORGANIZATION

JAN SOWA: The October Revolution is one of the best known and most commented on events of the 20th century. However, the developments in Southern Ukraine in the wake of the Revolution and the end of the First World War have remained rather obscure. Could you shed some light on the very peculiar and intriguing story of the Free Territory?

DMYTRO STASIUK: It is generally referred to as Makhnovshchina, after its leader, Nestor Makhno. Makhno himself was a peasant, a political activist and an anarchist. He tried to organize people, to popularize ideas of anarchism and a stateless society. During the civil war, he was mostly engaged in military operations. Despite that, he also undertook attempts to bring about a major transformation of society. His efforts were partly successful, but ultimately failed because of the civil war, which lasted from 1917 to 1921. In 1921, Makhno was completely defeated by the Bolsheviks and forced to emigrate to the West, finally settling down in France.

JS: How large was Free Territory? We know that there are autonomous centers, anarchist squats and even larger initiatives like entire villages. But as far as I know, it was a really big experiment.

DS: It affected a territory populated by around seven million people. Its exact size changed all the time, because the borders shifted during the civil war and people were constantly moving around. It was comprised mostly of what is now three Ukrainian regions called oblasts: Zaporizhia oblast, Dnipro oblast and Donetsk oblast, but military operations were also happening in other regions, so even more people were somewhat involved in it.

JS: You said that Makhno was an anarchist. Was there any tradition of anarchist organization before, or was it the first time anyone attempted to do such a thing? Obviously it couldn't have been done by Makhno alone. There must have been a group of likeminded people. Where had they come from?

DS: In Huliaipole, where Makhno was from, there was an anarchist organization that was started at the beginning of the 20th century. They participated in first Russian revolution of 1905-1907, but most of them were killed by the police. Makhno himself was arrested and spent eight years behind bars. When he was released from prison in 1917 after the February Revolution, he was known to have suffered for the people's cause. He had a reputation of being a political activist, so people were eager to listen to him. Some individuals who had formed his anarchist group more than a decade earlier had remained in his village. There was also a new generation of anarchists, as well as anarchist groups in other towns and villages, mainly in Novospasovka on the shore of the Sea of Azov. The Novospasovka group is rarely mentioned, as people usually talk about Huliaipole, but the Novospasovka group was also very active and joined the movement. Some of these anarchists were anarcho-syndicalists, but they were concentrated mostly in the larger cities like Odessa and those in the Donetsk region. There were not a lot of connections and not a lot of cooperation between those groups. In Kharkiv, anarchists created a federation called Nabat. They also sent representatives to the Makhno movement and helped with editing newspapers, but cooperation between them was limited.

JS: So it was, after all, a kind of wider network of anarchist actions and mobilizations, right? Kharkiv, Odessa and Donbas.

DS: I don't know if we can call it a network, because the connections between them were really poor. They did not have enough communication between each other. It was quite a problem. There were also a lot of misunderstandings. Makhno and other anarchists from village areas were more focused on practical measures, while anarchists from Kharkiv were more focused on theory, so there were some instances of miscommunication, disagreements and disputes.

JS: You mentioned anarchist initiatives in the cities. In my imagination, it is something more typical for anarchist cells to be in big cities, where there is heavy industry, a lot of workers etc. It seems to be a better environment for an anarcho-syndicalist organization. But the Makhno movement, in my understanding, affected mainly rural areas. Were there any bigger cities in the Free Territory?

DS: It mostly affected two big cities: Ekaterinoslav, which now is Dnipro, and Alexandrovsk, which now is Zaporizhia. Because of constant changes in the front line, different factions invaded these cities, so Makhno stayed in Ekaterinoslav only three times for rather short periods. He tried to organize the workers with some success. Railroad workers tried to create some kind of workers' council in order to regulate the railway system, but during the civil war the city was captured by the White Guard and this initiative ultimately failed. The movement covered mostly rural areas simply because Southern Ukraine was largely an agricultural region. The economy of this region focused on growing grain there and selling it to Western countries. The aristocracy owned the land so the peasant population was dispossessed and exploited. Makhno promised a major land reform with the equal distribution of property between all people. That's why they supported him.

JS: Just to understand the situation: those were huge land estates using serfdom labor up to the late 19th century when they were abandoned by Tsar Alexander II, yes? So a kind of post-feudal huge latifundia worked by *de facto* slaves?

DS: Yes, because after the peasants were freed from serfdom, the landlords hired poor peasants to work for them.

JS: Serfdom was abandoned, but no land redistribution was carried out, right?

DS: There was some land redistribution, but it was hugely in favor of the landlords. No one was really satisfied by it.

JS: So it was a direct transition from serfdom to proletariat. Peasants had to work for someone else in order to sustain themselves.

DS: Some of them were richer. For example there were German colonies that received a lot of land, but others were poor. In rural areas, everything depended on the amount of children in a family, and on their gender. If a person had a lot of sons, they would become richer, but if they had a lot of daughters they would eventually become poorer. This kind of situation is described by anthropologists in other places of the world as well.

JS: You mentioned also other centers of anarchist action and initiatives in Ukraine. What do you think made anarchism so attractive for those people? Is it their particular situation or some cultural tradition, like the one of the Cossacks, known for their love of freedom and independence? In Swiss Jura, for example, there were watchmakers who self-organized, and I find it less surprising as it was a self-organization of highly skilled, small semi-industrial producers already densely networked. But here you have a completely different context of rural poverty.

DS: Culture was an important factor, but I think material issues played a greater role. Culturally, Huliaipole is in the Zaporizhia region, where Cossacks had lived for centuries. But a lot of them became counter-revolutionaries in the early 20th century. The Tsar used them to beat protestors on the streets. For people from southern Ukraine, that was shocking, because in all their songs and legends the Cossacks were noble warriors who fought for freedom against the Turks and Tatars invading Ukraine. The Cossacks were defending this population, so seeing them as tsarist police was a complete shock to people. Some historians in Ukraine try to represent Makhnovshchina as a reincarnation of the Cossack movement, but I believe it was rather a completely modern phenomenon. It tried to do something new, not to return to the past. Unlike some nationalistic movements in Ukraine, which used this Cossack aesthetic for their propaganda.

JS: Is it very much the case nowadays? Looking at the recent developments in Ukraine, in the last five years since Maidan, I see an ambivalent picture. On the one hand there have been people organizing to get rid of the oppressive power. On the other hand, my anarchist friends told me that anarchists were kicked out of most Maidans, and actually the

only place where they were allowed to stay on the Maidan was Kharkiv. There was a lot of fascist and nationalist mobilization permitted. Is it still a reverberation of problems from the early 20th century?

DS: It is a complicated issue. What you said is correct. A lot of Ukrainians have this mix of ideas and ideologies that they do not separate from one other. They were fighting for freedom, but when nationalists came to Maidan with their slogan "Glory to Ukraine!", people thought it was a nice idea and they simply repeated it. Political culture in Ukraine is crazy, not developed and people often mix different things both from left and right. As far as I know, most of the Ukrainian population does not realize who Stepan Bandera really was. They think that he was some nice guy who wanted freedom and democracy for Ukraine. Obviously the truth is that he was not in favor of democracy. He followed an authoritarian ideology. The problem is that people do not try to go deeper into things.

JS: We have the same situation with Polish nationalist heroes who were very similar to Bandera: they were freedom fighters and fascists at the same time. So maybe it is not so unique to Ukraine. But let's go back to the history of the Free Territory. Can you describe in practical terms how it functioned. What was the organization of power? I think there is no suitable name for it. It was not a state. It was a kind of anti-state political organization.

DS: There were gatherings or councils, where representatives from each smaller region assembled. It was considered the highest authority, but it was not a permanent arrangement. In the liberal parliamentary system, people are elected to an office on local or national level and they hold it for a certain period of time. In a more democratic system that functioned around the Free Territory, a village could send a representative to a council, and then in three weeks they could choose another person to represent them in a different council if they wanted to. There was also an executive committee that was supposed to put the council's decisions into practice. Any person from this committee could be replaced at any time with immediate effect.

JS: Were these representatives obliged by any instructions to act in a certain way?

DS: They were supposed to do as the council told them. The council did not resemble a parliament that just passes laws. They were directly deciding what should be done, and the committee was putting that into action.

JS: This council acted for a region, was it the entire Free Territory, or was there some sort of hierarchy of councils?

DS: All village dwellers or factory workers in the city gathered together to discuss certain issues. After that they sent a representative to the council. Councils functioned as gatherings of representatives: they got together, discussed, made declarations, memorandums etc. Then they came back home to talk to the people who had sent them, passing on what was decided during the council meeting. So the function of the representatives was to mediate both ways. People were actively discussing politics back then. They did not have a lot of political expertise, but they were very engaged in political debates.

Not only a village or a factory committee could send their own representative, but a military unit that fought in the insurgent army as well. So there were various kinds of units of organization: village, factory, military etc. And they all could participate in decision making. Activists of various political parties opposed this system, worrying that the peasants would vote for some counter-revolutionary candidate, but they did not.

JS: That's a very important point. Nowadays, every time someone comes up with the idea of making the political system more democratic, somebody else objects: "No! No! If we allow people too much freedom, they will vote for fascists. People need to be controlled." The example you gave seems to contradict this negative stereotype of reactionary commoners.

DS: It was a shock for the activists of the parties who did not believe in people. They thought that people had to be ruled by them.

JS: What is always very important regarding practicalities is how is the material production is organized. Were there cooperatives in the Free Territory? Or any other forms of common ownership of means of production?

DS: Makhno promised the land to the people, but most of them wanted to keep the land for their families. The land was divided equally between the people. But they were also educated to make communes.

JS: Something like a kolkhoz?

DS: Kolkhozes were organized by the state, and we are talking about self-organized free communes. So they were closest to what we might call agricultural cooperatives. Farmers were working together, there was a common pool of products that they gathered. Later they were distributing the crops between themselves, and also giving a part of it to Makhno's army.

JS: So people had the freedom to decide that they wanted to work just on their own field, right? There was no forced collectivization?

DS: No, absolutely not. Makhno and other anarchists were constantly propagating cooperative model, but only propagating, not forcing anyone to abide by it. Food supply in the cities was far from perfect. Some people from the cities who had relatives in villages returned there to join communes. It was very good for them. They could feed themselves. Trade was quite limited in fact. The villagers of Huliaipole were once short on textiles and they couldn't get any new clothes, so they gathered food and sent it to Moscow and Petrograd saying that it was their gift to the workers, and in return they would like to get some textiles. It was like barter, but nobody calculated how much to give and how much should be returned.

JS: Why to Moscow and Petrograd? Why not Kiev or some other Ukrainian city? Was there no industrial production closer to Free Territory?

DS: There was some production in many cities in Ukraine at the time, but Kiev was more into sugar plants and other agricultural processing. One needs to remember as well that it was a war economy and a lot depended on who was controlling Kiev at a given moment. Everybody was fighting over control of Kiev, so it changed hands many times. Moscow and Petrograd were more like revolutionary cities that were constantly in the hands of Bolsheviks. The anarchists still considered the Bolsheviks to be their comrades at the time. They thought that they could agitate people to govern themselves, not to be governed by parties. They thought that leftist parties can agitate freely, but people should decide for themselves.

JS: I would like come back to the antagonism between the Bolsheviks and anarchists later on, but let us concentrate for a while longer on the practical aspect of the Free Territory's organization. You described how agriculture operated. Was there any industrial production within Free Territory?

DS: There was, but it was not well developed. Industrial production was concentrated mainly in Ekaterinoslav and Alexandrovsk, as I have already mentioned. In Donbas there was coal production already back then. In Huliaipole there were some brick factories and mills. They were run by trade unions. When Makhno returned from prison in 1917, he was elected as the head of this union and made radical demands towards factory bosses. He demanded an eight-hour working day and higher wages. During the civil war, the bosses had fled this region, so workers had to maintain this production by themselves. A lot of the Bolshevik's goals of giving the land to the peasants and the factories to the workers had been already implemented before the October Revolution in that region.

JS: That was very much the situation in Argentina after the crisis in 2001, where private owners were closing down the factories and moving to Miami, because they considered it not to be a good time for them. Workers were breaking into factories and making them produce again.

DS: The problem was that it happened on a small scale in the Free Territory because big industry simply was not there. It

was a huge obstacle to all the war efforts, because Makhno's fighters had no control over any weapon factories, so they had to depend on other sources of getting military equipment.

JS: These factories were later nationalized, right? I mean a few years after the October Revolution, all industry became controlled by the state.

DS: Later, yes, but the period right after the October Revolution was very chaotic. The case of railway workers provides an example of the anarchists' influence in the region after the Revolution. They formed a committee and controlled the movement of trains — both cargo and passenger — as well as the prices of tickets. It functioned very well and was intended to be a model for other factories in Ekaterinoslav. However, the city was retaken by the White Guard before this plan could be implemented.

JS: How was the justice system and security organized in the Free Territory? Was there any militia or police? And what happened to people who were criminals? How were they judged?

DS: Actually that was huge problem for this movement. They had a counter-intelligence organization, but we don't have much information about it. They were certainly useful for the army, because the movement had problems with people infiltrating it. Some sources claim that they were operating in quite a harsh manner, similar to the Cheka. It is unclear how it really worked. The counter-intelligence unit was run by a person named Lev Zadov. When Makhnovshchina was defeated, Zadov stayed in USSR, joined the Cheka and worked for the Soviet Union. In 1937, at the peak of Stalin's repressions, he was executed.

JS: Was there an organized militia and justice system?

DS: No.

JS: So did the army also perform the function of internal security? In situations like petty crimes, when somebody stole

something or attacked someone? It is usually the task of police and justice system to deal with these kind of problems.

DS: The army fulfilled that function quite often. But again: we are talking about a period of almost constant war. Maybe if the situation had stabilized, they would have made some decisions about the judicial system, but they did not manage to develop it. There are reports of court-like situations during council assemblies, such as when one of the representatives was drinking too much. The accused came to this council, he said he was sorry, admitted that he was very stressed and begged for forgiveness.

There's another story involving Makhno himself. Apparently he was on a railway station and he saw a guy who was putting up an antisemitic banner nearby. Makhno simply drew his gun and shot the guy on the spot, without any investigation. Everyone agreed he had done the right thing.

JS: That is precisely what I wanted to ask you about: antisemitism. Unfortunately it is not a World War II invention in the region. There had been antisemitic episodes and movements in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus long before the Holocaust happened. When you go back all the way to the Khmelnytsky Uprising, there was a huge problem at the time. What was the situation in the Free Territory regarding Jews and antisemitism?

DS: There was a huge Jewish community in Huliaipole. But the Jews were peasants like everyone else and most people in Huliaipole treated them as their peers. There was no systemic, widespread antisemitism in Makhno's army. Before the Revolution there had been a wide-spread antisemitic organization called Chornaya sotnya, but Makhno claims it had no support from the people of Huliaipole. Later, when the White Guard attacked the Jewish communities in southern Ukraine, Makhno gave the communities weapons to defend themselves. He tried his best to help the Jews, to protect them. Of course it was a huge movement and sometimes antisemitic people joined it, but there were definitely no pogroms of Jews orchestrated by Makhno's army, unlike in the case of other military leaders in Ukraine, like Grigoriev for example.

The communist propaganda tried to accuse Makhno of various crimes. So in their newspapers they portrayed

him as an antisemite and claimed that he supported pogroms. However, there are no documents and no account of any witnesses that would suggest that Makhno inspired any pogroms, unlike other leaders.

JS: What about the situation of women? Were women's rights part of education? The October Revolution and the first years of the Soviet state had this element of women's rights and sexual emancipation. There was an important change in how the family functioned, and a deliberate rejection of the bourgeois patriarchal family. All that was canceled only by Stalinism. Was it addressed in any way in the Makhnovshchina?

DS: Unfortunately, no. People were quite patriarchal in rural areas. When Makhno lived in exile in France, he had a friend named Ida Mett. She recalled that Macho once met an Italian antifascist, who had fled Mussolini to France. This gentleman wanted to know how Makhno was trying to make a revolution in such patriarchal country as the Russian Empire. Makhno replied: "Oh, at least you understand me." It was a problem they faced. Almost all of the leaders of the movement were men. There was Makhno's wife, Halyna Kuzmenko. She was quite famous.

JS: Did she have a function in the movement?

DS: It is not clear. Emma Goldman met her, when she visited Kiev. Makhno's wife went secretly to Kiev to meet her and told her the truth about the Makhno movement, especially to counter the accusations of antisemitism. What happened next was almost like a beginning of a detective story. She suggested that Goldman and her friend, Alexander Bergmann, would be captured by the Makhnovists, but no harm would be done to them and they would be able to see everything in Huliaipole with their own eyes. But Emma Goldman thought it was too risky and refused.

Relations between Makhno and his wife seemed modern and emancipated, but other people from the movement were more or less patriarchal. It was a big problem. In addition, there was a woman named Olga Taratuta who organized the Anarchist Black Cross in Ukraine at that time. She helped anarchists who were imprisoned by the Bolsheviks and by the White Guard. Makhno once said that there are only three

true anarchists in Ukraine: himself, Peter Arshinov and Olga Taratuta. He recognized her as one of the most important figures in the anarchist movement.

JS: How did this bold Makhnovist experiment ended?

DS: The history of the movement is complicated, because they were constantly making alliances and the Bolsheviks were breaking them. In 1920, the Bolsheviks consolidated their power. They defeated the White Guard in Crimea completely, with the help of Makhno's army.

JS: So it was not only alliance of ideas and verbal support. Makhno's soldiers actively participated in the civil war on the side of Bolsheviks, didn't they?

DS: Yes. When the Bolsheviks understood that they no longer had to fight the White Guard, they consolidated all their power and military units in the region and started crushing Makhno's movement. Makhno managed to fight for nearly a year, until the summer of 1921. The Ukranians had huge problems with getting supplies and military equipment, while the Bolsheviks at that time introduced the so called NEP—New Economic Policy.

JS: That was a kind of reinstitution of capitalism. Lenin gave a speech during the 10th Party Congress, when he said that they were still controlling "the commanding heights" of the economy, but at the level of everyday life they were allowing people to be small entrepreneurs. This was a step backwards, contrary not only to revolutionary rhetoric, but also to the original Bolshevik agenda.

DS: Yes, but people decided to say OK, because they were very weary from the war. There was World War I, in which a lot of people fought, then the Revolution, followed by the Civil War and they simply had enough. This proposition to go back to some kind of normality was quite satisfying for the peasants, so they agreed to it. Makhno's movement was poorly equipped and nobody was willing to fight for it anymore. The remains of their army were forced to move back to their homes, but in the 1930s, many of them were prosecuted and executed. Makhno and some of his comrades fled to Roma-

nia, then to Poland, to Germany, and finally Makhno stopped in France.

JS: Were there any signs before it happened that the Bolsheviks, or communists in general, might turn against the anarchists? That was not an isolated situation. The massacre of Kronstadt, or later on Stalin sending support to crush the anarchists in Catalonia—it happened again and again. That was one of the things that Orwell couldn't stand about the Soviet Union.

DS: It was not a surprise, but the problem was that Makhno's army did not have any options. They were fighting a war against the White Guard and they were in desperate need of equipment. At the beginning maybe, in 1918, they believed that Bolsheviks were fellow revolutionaries.

JS: I think the Paris Commune was the moment when the anarchists and communists really split on practical terms, not only in theoretical discussions between Marx and Proudhon. Anarchists saw the dictatorial element in the communist movement early on. So maybe it could have been foreseen? On the other hand, France and the Paris Commune is one thing, and the situation on the ground is a different thing. There were no clashes before 1920/1921?

DS: There were a lot of clashes. At the start of the Revolution they were working together, when there was no real civil war, but simply changes of institutions. Revolutionaries of various parties and anarchists were trying to make institutions work in a new way. At that time they were allies. Later, in the spring of 1919, the Makchnovists made the first agreement with the Bolsheviks, that they would form a brigade of the Red Army, but all of their structures remained the same. They elected their commanders.

JS: And they could fit into the organizational structure of Red Army?

DS: They remained as an insurgent brigade. They had their own structure and only at the uppermost level were they subject to some general decisions. After the military warlord called

Grigoriev betrayed and turned to White Guard, the communists decided to declare these councils completely illegal. This was the first conflict, but Makhno decided to resolve it in a smart way. He said that he would give up his role as the commander and leave the army. The brigade that he was commanding received a communist commander for some time. Makhno gathered his supporters and went to kill Grigoriev and agitate his troops to join the anarchist cause. There was a lot of fighting and they regained control of Free Territory in the autumn of 1919. It was a huge defeat for the White Guard, as Makhno's army totally disrupted their supply lines. He thought that the Bolsheviks would see that the anarchists' army was very effective and they would let it be organized internally the way they wanted.

Unfortunately, at the same time a typhus epidemic broke out and Makhno's army was completely disorganized by it. Makhno himself was ill and his army virtually disappeared due to the epidemic in the winter of 1919/1920. After that Bolsheviks regained control of the region, in spring of 1920, Makhno gathered his forces again and they were fighting guerrilla warfare against the Bolsheviks and the White Guard.

In the meantime, the White Guard had regained its strength, so the Bolsheviks and Makhno decided to strike an agreement. That was the first official agreement between equal parties. It consisted of a political agreement and a military agreement. The military agreement stated that Makhno's army would retain its structure and would fight the White Guard, not the Bolsheviks. The political agreement provided for freedom of political agitation. Bolsheviks promised to free all anarchist prisoners and there was a point about the autonomy of Makhno's Free Territory—it was supposed to remain self-determined, and the councils would decide whatever they wanted to do.

JS: And this agreement was not respected later?

DS: Actually, they fully agreed to all the points except the one about autonomy. They were still discussing this issue when the White Guard in Crimea was defeated much faster than anyone thought.

JS: So at that point the Bolsheviks decided to get rid of Makhno's movement altogether?

DS: Yes. The Makhnovists expected it to happen at some point, but they hoped that it would take more time, and that this would be time for them to consolidate their power and gather support in the territory. However, their forces were attacked simultaneously in Crimea and Huliaipole. Makhno's army was crushed again in this confrontation.

JS: Do you think that it could have been prevented? For example, without this typhus outbreak and the war in Crimea taking longer, was there a potential for effective self-organization and defense against the Bolsheviks?

DS: Maybe, but it is still quite debatable. The region lacked heavy industry and it did not have the weapons industry to sustain the army, so it was very difficult for it to defend itself. Their position would still be quite problematic and the Bolsheviks could have crushed them in a later period.

JS: What are the implications of the movement for today, in your opinion? Apart from the fact that it is a very interesting historical development in itself. Today we talk about self-organization, political reform, political action or a revolution to create a more equal society that wouldn't be ruled by a king or a parliament. Right now we have representatives who are completely unaccountable. If we think about this transition to a different world, what are the lessons from this historical experience of the anarchist movement?

DS: First it's the idea that the representatives should be absolutely controlled by the people he or she is representing. If we see some sign of wrongdoing or not implementing the decisions that people made, a given representative should be removed from the position of power immediately.

On the other hand, nowadays most people live in urban areas, not villages. So there is a question of whether this economy and political system would work in cities. That should be given some serious consideration. Makhno relied

on the writings of Bakunin and Kropotkin. But Kropotkin was interested mainly in village communes that would focus on agricultural and small industry production. Nowadays this idea is debatable because of how the economic organization has changed. This should probably be reconsidered and some new forms of self-organization should be invented.

JS: How about when it comes to practical military organization?

DS: There are huge problems when you're trying to create a completely new society, in the situation, where there is war and everybody fights.

JS: Of course. Do you think that it was a unique historical conjuncture, or is there a possibility of history repeating itself? Maybe it could somehow reproduce given the current situation in eastern Ukraine? There is a destabilization of the region, fighting between the rebels backed by Russia and the central authority in Kiev. Could part of Ukraine somehow break out and recreate this utopia?

DS: The possibility of a repetition might be there, but it would take some effort to get the people behind this idea. They don't really know anything about it.

JS: That is what I also wanted to ask. Is there anything that has remained of Makhnovshchina in popular consciousness? I don't mean historians like yourself, who professionally research it. When you go to the places where it happened, is there any trace of it in people's collective memory, imagination or culture?

DS: Makhno is remembered in various places around the former Huliaipole in today's Zaporizhia Oblast. However, he has remained a divisive figure: some people like him very much, but others lost relatives in the conflicts and hate him. Makhno has remained a quite popular figure in southern Ukraine, apart from the Donbas region.

JS: What about practical self-organization? Are there people organizing cooperatives? Or maybe something else in the former Free Territory area that is not only memory, but an actual practice that you know of?

DS: No.

JAN
SOWA

JS: So it is more about the idea and the figure of Makhno than any practical experience?

DS: Yes. When the Soviet Union collapsed, many started to investigate Makhno and research on Makhnovshchina proliferated. Many often try to interpret him as a part of traditional Ukrainian national history, for example in the context of the Cossacks' legacy. Others are persuaded that he was completely pro-Ukrainian and that he joined Petlura's forces, and simply by some terrible twist of fate they did not become friends.

JS: What was Makhno's attitude towards national identity or "Ukrainianness"?

DS: In terms of national identity, he considered himself an Ukrainian, but he also spoke Russian. He hated people who forced him to speak Ukrainian. He also thought that the Ukrainian government was nationalistic and bourgeois. And that is why he rejected Petlura's project.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DILAR DIRIK
LEARNING FROM ROJAVA

JAN SOWA: In recent years, the Middle East has defied a lot of stereotypes, forcing many to rethink what is possible in the region, and what is not. Rojava is one of the key examples of how a radically democratic self-organization went absolutely against these stereotypes. It is not one of the typical forms of a national liberation movement. It makes me think of the early days of anti-colonial struggles, when people like Frantz Fanon fought for independence, though not necessarily in the name of nation-state projects. In the contemporary context it is something unusual. What path led the Kurdish people to this position?

DILAR DIRIK: A lot of these stereotypes are constructed from an orientalist perspective. Even today, we mainly see the perspective of those who have ruled the Middle East and still have got some sort of economic or political interests in that region. When we consider things such as nationalism, authoritarianism or religious fundamentalism, we need to make a distinction between the official image—the ideologies of ruling parties, governments or non-state groups—and the actual state of societies of that region. Orientalist images determine policies, as Edward Said has pointed out. They actually have material impact on people's lives. While there is undeniable a deep system of patriarchy in the region, when it comes to the status of women US, UK and other governments had to construct in the media this image of a Middle Eastern woman that needs to be saved from oppression; therefore invasion, killing, massacres and extrajudicial torture are justified. It's a war of ideologies; a war of images.

The example of Rojava seems to really defy that ideological vision of the region. However, the locally-rooted political self-organization you are talking about is not necessarily a new invention. It is rather founded on an underlying societal way of life that has always prevailed in the Middle East, in spite of the imposition of nation states, borders, neoliberalism and more re-

cently religious fundamentalism. Of course, it is combined with political philosophy. As you rightfully pointed out, a lot of anti-colonial movements were not necessarily driven by the same nationalistic or statist ideas that led to the emergence of nation states in Europe. It was not so much about the accumulation of capital and international wars, but rather a struggle for resistance, dignity, liberation from occupation and colonization.

But to come more directly to your question, the Kurdish movement was indeed very much shaped by the anti-colonial struggles of the 20th century. It was at the time of the Cold War, a time when national liberation movements were also heavily influenced by the Eastern Bloc and enjoyed its support. They had to position themselves in these parameters of global politics that were already set. So the Kurdistan Workers' Party—or PKK from its Kurdish name: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—was founded as a Marxist-Leninist party and fought in the name of a Kurdish socialist state. There were also other Kurdish movements, especially right after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. They were more urban, comprised more of intellectuals and wanted to have the same state as everybody else. It was an elitist project based on a nationalist ideology. Contrary to that, the PKK had an internationalist perspective from the very beginning—they wanted to create a Kurdish state to improve the conditions of the proletariat (it was written in their manifest from 1978) and to contribute to world proletariat revolution, hand in hand with the Turkish people. It was never a chauvinistic Kurdish project. They were actually fighting against Kurdish nationalistic groups at that time. Among its co-founders were Turkish socialists.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, along with other members of the movement increasingly critiqued the failures of state socialism. They saw how a bureaucratic and hierarchical system that is anonymous, mechanized and authoritarian was not functioning and was not bringing freedom to people. They started asking questions: What does freedom mean? What does political action mean? How does it provide answers to social problems such as poverty, ideological rule over the oppressed people or the position of women? There were attempts to think of the Middle East as confederal democracy already in the 1990s. That model would basically mean a solidarity association of various Middle Eastern

communities. The Kurdish movement always thought of the region as a whole and never focused on the isolated Kurdistan; it rather saw it in relation with neighboring communities. The fact that Kurdistan is divided into four further confirmed the inherent problem of statehood. Could the state, the main cause of exploitation and violence, be a solution?

In the wake of the Iraq War of 2003, the consolidation of a Kurdish state-like structure, the Kurdistan Regional Government, which had been formed a decade earlier, occurred at the same time as internal struggles within the PKK, and soon after the imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. That experience from Northern Iraq of what an independent Kurdish state would look like contributed greatly to the new analysis and to the urge to think beyond the state form as such. Iraqi Kurdistan is not really a state, but it functions as one. It has its bureaucracy, a parliament, its own economy and an army. It does not actually guarantee freedom to the people. It brings freedom only to the social elite of a few wealthy families. It has created a bureaucracy which was not there before and which further limits the lives of people. It does not bring much in terms of class struggle, nor any betterment of the fate of women. That was a very enlightening experience and allowed the movement not only to distance itself from the project of a Kurdish nation state, but also to see more clearly a system of dependence, where the whole world system is determined by certain states. The Middle East is no exception. If you gain independence, are you really independent? Or do you simply become dependent in a new way, on parameters set by an outside agenda? Isn't it better to have an alternative system, one that would not subscribe to the rules set by the existing one? Maybe the state is the root of the problem?

This is why the analysis went all the way back, reshaping the traditional leftist agenda as well. Rather than looking at the emergence of capitalism, Öcalan decided to look at the emergence of state, which happened in Mesopotamia. Together with the coming of state, 5000 years ago, the patriarchy was also born, as were the ideas of private property, accumulation, the centralization of the economy, hierarchy, monopolies etc. The history of the state-form is basically the history of hierarchy. In those matters, Öcalan was very heavily influenced by various authors, but I would emphasize also that his analyses very much rely on a deep reading of the non-state, non-capitalist, non-mod-

ernist modes of being, knowing and living that prevailed in Kurdistan in spite of the state.

JS: That's what I wanted to ask. One of the narrations is that Öcalan, while in prison, grew familiar with the writings of Murray Bookchin, and that changed the movement.

DD: As I've said already, in the 1990s, before Öcalan knew about Bookchin, PKK was announcing that they no longer wanted to create an independent state. This had been about a decade before Öcalan read Bookchin. This is public knowledge, available in the congress resolutions, etc. In addition, the idea of a configuration like democratic confederalism in the Middle East goes back to the 1990s. And particularly the question of women is much more radical in Öcalan than in Bookchin. However, it is true that Öcalan, while languishing in prison, had time to read, so to develop and deepen his philosophy as well. It was not only Bookchin, he also read the works of many different scholars of the Frankfurt School. He also came to really like Nietzsche and Braudel, and many feminist and Middle Eastern authors; various authors from a range of different places. It is also important to realize that a person has only limited access to literature in prison. His work often gets censored. Bookchin's primary influence on Öcalan is related to the former's writings on ecology and municipalism.

JS: I'm surprised that Bookchin's books were allowed in prison at all.

DD: Yes. Especially the idea of ecology. One of the most inspiring of Bookchin's ideas is the concept of social ecology: to think of society in terms of an ecological rather than a mechanical system, where politics is no longer needed because it's so bureaucratized. That is very subversive in the context of Turkish state.

It should be noted that the inspiration went both ways, as Bookchin looks at the history of ancient Mesopotamia, which is basically also the history of Kurdistan. Looking at the history of hierarchy, the history of domination, rather than just class or national oppression, this is a very significant inspiration from Bookchin. However, as I've said, there is another element as well:

the forms of actual resistance practiced in Kurdistan, by which I mean a nonhierarchical social organization embedded in the traditional way of life in the Kurdish Mountains. Not so much in the cities, where urbanization, capitalism and the state have remodeled people's way of living and thinking about the world. This is an influence that you can see in Öcalan's biography. He went to Syria in 1979 and stayed there until 1999. For these 20 years, he was actively engaged, especially with the people of Rojava. People from other parts of Kurdistan would come to see him either in Lebanon or in Syria. There are pictures of him having people's assemblies and education programs with women only sometimes. Those were working class people, peasants, people who had no formal education, basically the wretched of the earth. And they were taken seriously by him.

J
S: When you talk about this traditional element—traditional in terms of always being there as a way of life—do you refer to indigenous forms of organization that had been there for millennia, or to some element of Islam like the institution of al-shura—the Arabic term for "consultation"—where you need to consult those affected by a decision before taking it? Ernest Gellner, in his book Muslim Society, along with other scholars, point to these and other elements of Islam that make it close to a modern democratic organization, and that could be used in establishing a different political world, not the one that is ruled by political elites and very centralized. How do you see this interplay of Islam and an egalitarian indigenous way of life that predates it?

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D: The nation state has imposed a new way of how individuals think of themselves as citizens of a nation state. Your loyalty is to that nation state—its economy, its bureaucracy, its army. But nation states have existed in our region for less than 100 years. People have still not really come terms with that. In many places they don't really care what the state is. In many areas, Kurdistan people didn't realize what state they lived in until the 1970s even. If you asked people in the mountains and villages, they would have no concept of what a republic is. It bears little significance for their daily lives. The idea that your belonging to a nation state is the primary political relation you have has not

penetrated deeply into the fabric of Middle Eastern societies. This is partly to do with the role of religion. For Muslim communities, the idea of Ummah is basically a community based on ideals, beliefs and a certain way of life. Ethnicity and nationality is far from central. The notion of a democratic nation advanced by the Kurdish movement—i.e. a nation that includes all nations, ethnic and religious groups and is based on shared values—is in line with that idea. The principles of democratic confederalism correspond quite well with indigenous practices of self-organizing that have existed in the region for a long time. And this applies not uniquely to Islam. Councils also exist in the Alevi culture. Among the Alevi there are people who are trusted, have charisma and have a strong feeling of justice. When two families have a dispute, these trusted people bring them together and organize consolation ceremonies. In Kurdish culture, for example, when there are two people or two families arguing and the women take down their scarves, laying them on the floor, the argument has to be over. There are all these cultural phenomenon related to our „way of life": a sense of community, of collective identity based on ethical values. It remains in stark contrast with identity imposed by the state, which is based on abstract concepts: rules, laws, regulations and bureaucracy. Various religious or ethical value systems, no matter how we judge them, contain some elements of morality and ethics. People lose that when the nation state arrives. Their way of life—especially its economic dimension—has been based on solidarity and subsistence on a much smaller scale.

J
S: A mutual self-help?

D
D: Yes. People often ask us questions about Rojava and how they can implement these solutions. Do you know why the communes in Rojava can organize themselves so well? One reason is because they are all related, they're all family, they all know each other, they have lived in that place for hundreds of years. Everybody builds houses together. There are entire villages where everybody built every house. Because the scale was much smaller, where face to face democracy actually worked, we are not talking about an anonymous society where people don't know their neighbor's name. We're talking about a place, where the community ties are very strong, in the villages especially,

where people have love, empathy and solidarity with each other.

Obviously, this can be quite oppressive sometimes. I'm not trying to idealize that, I'm just pointing to a sense of mutual responsibility, of seeing yourself in somebody else. This attitude is getting lost as capitalism and neoliberal individualism are slowly coming into our region. This is why this direct form of democracy is so important, and why it resonates with people. In interviews I did as part of my academic research, people were describing the Rojava revolution as bringing themselves back to themselves, regaining their essence and going back to their roots and their identity. Regaining the right to shape and create the society that they want, the right to work in a way that is productive and helps to sustain and protect the community. Not useless and meaningless work. It really gives people meaning and a place in history. I think that the feeling of history-making is closely linked to the ability to beautify the place you live in, to be in harmony with nature, and to be a meaningful person in a collective community. In this system, various communities, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic, are being encouraged to participate on their own terms, while democratizing themselves from within.

JS: This a kind of fascinating convergence or synergy between universal ideas that were drawn up in a completely different context, and the local experience of how people actually lived. The way I see it is that it's not a process of changing society according to some imported rules, but a situation where one tradition is enriching another in its conceptual and practical aspects. I will come back later to the question of scale and applicability, but I would like to ask you about the very practical aspects of this self-organization. I mean procedurally. How is it run? What are the procedures or practical solutions in this democratic organization? Maybe you could also describe it from the perspective of a directly participating person? How is it built from bottom up? What kind of structures does it imply?

DD: I grew up in Europe, as a part of the Kurdish minority in Germany, and we have had the same model of democratic autonomy. In Germany, the Kurdish population is spread out over all the parts of the country. Wherever there is a Kurdish population

they establish a council—a people's assembly. In Hamburg, there are actually three of them because the population of Kurds there is very large. In addition, for each assembly there is always a corresponding women's council consisting of the same women that are also part of the general assembly, but they also have autonomous decision-making mechanisms. There are committees on education, social affairs and whatever else they need, depending on the current situation.

J S: These are a kind of general assembly that happen regularly and where everyone can bring his or her problems?

D D: It's a council of people who have assemblies. This is how we organize our political lives. This is something new, that has taken place only in the last decade. I'm giving an example from Europe, specifically because of the question of applicability. This is a place where we don't all live on the same street. It's different from Kurdistan. Before, in the 1990s and later, the Kurdish struggle in Europe was just focused on mobilizing for Kurdistan. Then, with the advent of democratic confederalism, with the need of self-organization wherever we were, with all connections wherever you lived, an urgency developed that we had to resolve our social problems here as well. We've been living in these countries for ten, twenty, thirty years, so we also need to organize ourselves, not just for Kurdistan.

Now let's look at Turkey. When democratic confederalism was announced in 2005, people didn't really know what it meant. Were people giving up on independence? What was that supposed to be? Then they started founding people's councils and, later, communes. They engaged in having their own economic cooperatives: agricultural, textile, artisanal etc. They started forming their own academies for self-education. The state cracked down on these structures, calling them terrorist and separatist, and in 2009 10,000 people were put in prisons. These people were simply activists, mostly from the lower classes, who were organizing themselves. That is another instance of how this works or does not work in the middle of an authoritarian state like Turkey.

J S: Are there any structures built above those self-governing communities? I'm especially interested in the question of representation: do you elect representatives, and how is their mandate organized?

DD: In some places yes and in others—no. In the mountain areas, people can organize in the form of communes and nobody can do anything against that. Whereas in big cities you can't really do that, because you don't live in the same place. Communes have their own economies and basically everybody is a part of it. These are usually people who fully support Kurdish freedom. In places like Cizre or Nusaybin, people have had people's councils or people's assemblies (it's a matter of translation), where anybody can be a part of it, if they want to. Then they would elect co-presidents—one woman and one man—on a rotating basis. After that they would elect committees, which also rotate. The overarching structure in Turkey/northern Kurdistan is the Democratic Peoples' Congress, with delegates from the local structures. Similarly in other parts of Kurdistan and abroad, from small to higher units, autonomous bodies relate to each other horizontally and vertically in a confederal manner. But ultimately, the communes are the most direct way in which people shape their daily lives and politics.

JS: These committees are designated to deal with particular issues?

DD: Yes. For example, the economy, education, women's issues, youth, health, peace and reconciliation, justice, social and organizational matters, security etc. While women's committees exist in the mixed structures, women also have their parallel autonomous structures, which all have these committees as well.

JS: How do people get on these committees? Are they elected?

DD: You should not think of these structures as bureaucratic, standard institutions. Much depends on the respective size and format, but usually anyone can recommend themselves if they are an active part of the council or commune. Depending on how many people are in the structure, the number of people on a committee is determined at the assembly meeting. In assemblies, the structures approve the recommended people. If more than enough people sign up, people vote for the people on the committees. In matters relating to women, men do not get a vote.

J
S: But the committees do not have any actual power, do they? They only provide expertise, advice, opinions etc., yes?

D
D: I'm talking right now about Turkey. I will come the situation in Rojava later. It is the state that provides municipal services in Turkey. So the councils functioned more like a radical section of the community. They were kept from implementing things on the scale that they wanted, because technically they are illegal and are not officially recognized. However, when Kurdish parties won some municipalities in official, state-organized elections they were working with the councils. This is one of the reasons why so many Kurdish mayors are now in prison, because they are charged with supporting separatism. In the peace process from 2013 to 2015, there was some room for these kinds of parallel power structures and that's when most of them developed, but they have been shut down ever since.

In Rojava, the revolution erupted in 2012, but it's important to recognize that people had had this experience of self-organization all the way from 1980s, when they started secretly organizing underground. The umbrella women's movement—the one that is leading Rojava right now—was formed in 2005 illegally, and women's activities began as early as the 1980s, so people were already prepared. It wasn't like that in other parts of Syria, where people had to spontaneously do things. People already knew each other, they had some former organizational experience. The first thing that happened after the regime forces withdrew and people took over government buildings in 2012 was the re-emergence of the councils and later on of communes as well.

J
S: What is the relation between a council and a commune?

D
D: The communes are basically neighborhoods or streets or even villages, since some villages are very tiny, just 15 houses or something. They are directly organizing the things that they actually have some impact upon: whether they want to have a park in a certain place, whether they need more teachers for their kids, questions of security, settling disputes between neighbor-

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SOWA

hoods, providing health services etc. These are the things that communes decide and everybody is a part of the commune. Everybody who lives on that street is part of a commune. Communes meet regularly, every two weeks or something like that. They again have two co-presidents, two spokespeople (a woman and a man) and they rotate every year. Councils function on a larger scale than communes. Several communes send their delegates to the council. If a town has—let's say—seven communes, they all send their delegates to the council. These councils have their committees and two co-presidents. Now several councils elect a council for a region, which again has two co-presidents. It allows people to embark upon large-scale projects. For example when a commune is talking about a highway, it concerns not only the given commune, but the neighboring ones, and most likely the closest city as well. Councils are places of exchange and negotiations between them.

We can say that in Rojava there is something like a dual system that emerged because of the war situation. So there are official municipalities dealing mostly with public services like street maintenance, buildings, garbage disposal etc. And then there is an official canton administration. In order to represent and provide for people who do not necessarily agree with all these principles, this representative system emerged over the years.

Delegates from the commune are represented in the people's and women's councils of towns and cities. The councils, too, have committees, like the communes. Which means that, for instance, there are as many security committees as there are communes in a place, but there is also a security committee for that city's council. In other words, committees for the same dedicated subject exist vertically and horizontally. The councils are less direct, since they represent a wider scale of people, but they too, implement direct democracy. They engage in topics that exceed the concern of one street, but have a larger scope of activities. Several people's councils then eventually make up regional and then cantonal councils. The same logic of the system continues to the level of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

J
S: And a woman position is only elected by women, right? While the male position is elected by everybody. That's a very cunning strategy for women's empowerment.

D
D: Yes. It's to make sure that the women actually choose a woman, instead of symbolically enacting what men want. Whenever women are in certain positions, it means that the collective willpower of women is behind her. She is less likely to be coopted for men's ambitions this way. It also constitutes a strong organized solidarity of women among themselves, to make sure their demands are not compromised.

J
S: This is a political system that encompasses about 2.5 million people.

D
D: It's very difficult to estimate right now, because there are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and refugees in Rojava, and many people have also left. But we're certainly talking about millions, including many outsiders like refugees. To organize this number of people you need a lot of planning and also a kind of ideological unity. You cannot impose self-rule and force people to create communes if they don't want to. So activists initially literally went from house to house to ask people if they want to join and to explain how this project works, because some people, especially in larger settlements, had no concept of self-organizing.

On the other hand, there still exists a system of regular representative democracy, where Kurdish parties are also included and which are against the confederalist democratic system. Most of them are influenced by Iraqi Kurdish political parties, but there are also many different ethnic groups that might not want to be a part of communes, believing that if they do and the regime comes back then their marriages, diplomas etc. will not be recognized. All these things need to be considered. Such tensions are resolved through the dual democratic-representative system. For outside diplomacy there is something like an elected parliament with quotas for various ethnic groups and for Kurdish parties that are outside of the system of direct democracy. This is very difficult, the question of implementing an anti-authoritarian system, because how do you do that without imposing it, and thereby becoming authoritarian?

J
S: So the representatives in this official system function just like representatives in any regular parliamentary system. It's not a delegation where you can actually con-

trol your representatives. Unlike in the communes-council system. Is this what you mean by this dual power?

D
D: It is a representative democratic system where parties are dominant, but the social contracts and foundational documents are highly progressive, including commitments to rule out discrimination and the oppression of women, nationalistic or religious chauvinisms, etc. In January 2014, there was a social contract agreed in three cantons: Afrin, Kobanî and Jazira. This was a very revolutionary document. It said that the representative system that we will have, will still be revolutionary in terms of not engaging in any compromise regarding the liberation of women, being against the monopoly of power, neoliberalism and nationalism. It is actively encouraging the promotion of solidarity and various ideas of a decentralized democracy where women play an equal role. All these things are still enshrined in this system. Although it is a representative system, the principles behind it are still equality and justice. However, this is naturally very attractive to people due to their class base. For example, the more privileged of Rojava are naturally more attracted to representative systems than direct democratic ones. In particular, conservative parties and groups don't care about organizing themselves in communes. Or people from different ethnic backgrounds, for whom democratic self-organization is very new. For revolutionarily organized Kurdish people, self-administration and women's autonomous structures, etc. has been their tradition for decades.

There is yet another difficulty that has emerged in in the areas newly liberated from ISIS rule. How do you organize people there? It's very difficult, as you cannot simply roll up and say: you have to do it this way now. People need to find their way. This is why they first organized councils and then slowly encouraged people to form into communes to take control over their daily lives. At the same time, of course, people have alliances with various parties outside of Syria. Some people have loyalties to the regime. Many ordinary people say: „What is this? At the end the regime will come back so why bother?" It's very difficult to politically induce some kind of mental transformation among people. It works to some degree, and in some places more than in others. In rural areas it works well, but less so in the cities—rural areas just don't have the economic, political

and infrastructural means for individuals to do what they want under the embargo of the war; self-organization and self-help also make the most sense.

J
S: Let's go back to the technical aspect of the system. The communes are also economically organized in a democratic way, yes? They take democratic participatory decisions concerning the economic activities they want to pursue.

D
D: They organize themselves in cooperatives. If one cooperative is going to grow tomatoes and eggplants, another one is making cheese so they can have an exchange between each other. There are hundreds of very small women's cooperatives, some only consisting of 5-6 people. I have personally stayed with a family where the woman had no formal education and 6 or 7 already adult kids. She would get up at 5 o'clock every few days, go to cooperative with friends from her neighborhood and then go to the fields to work. At the end of the day, she has ownership over the fruits of her own labor, which makes her more independent and self-reliant.

Cooperatives sell their produce on the market at much lower prices than asked for by smugglers or traders. This is also to encourage people to buy from cooperatives, but they mainly distribute the products between their families and other villagers. There is naturally some coordination between them, because people had to coordinate, especially in 2013-2014, when the war embargo was so bad that even bread had to be rationed. There was a central mill in the Jazira canton where wheat was processed, and then they were making bread and giving it to people. Now things are much better, but it's still a war economy. People have to look after hundreds of thousands of refugees. Everything is changing all the time. In this sense, it is hard to expect a perfectly democratic economy under such conditions. Likewise, outside capitalist interests are trying to penetrate the economy there, which will cause even greater challenges in the future.

J
S: Is there any constitution of Rojava?

D
D: Yes. The social contract.

J
S: Is it written down expressis verbis as a document that

everybody can consult? Is it used in discussions about how should people proceed?

DD: Yes. It has also been translated into English. First it was the social contract of the Democratic Autonomy of Rojava agreed among the three cantons. They don't call it a constitution, they call it social contract on purpose. To say, that this is something that we agree on, not issued by a state but be peoples. And it is a result of 6-7 month-long discussions. And then there were women's laws that were written by women. The committee of women who drafted the preliminary version travelled to councils, committees, communes and academies to discuss it with women, both Kurdish and Arabic. Then they took all suggestions and they redrafted the final version that was announced on 8 March, i.e. on International Women's Day, in 2014, then was heavily discussed and drafted, and issued around the various cantons about a year later.

In 2016, there was a decision to organize as a federal unit—the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. The name "Rojava" was dropped, because it means west Kurdistan, and replaced with "Northern Syria" so that Arabs, the Christian community and the Turkmen can also identify with it, but also because it is now an area that goes beyond majority Kurdish regions. Because of that, now it is called the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, though Rojava is an area within it. We use the abbreviation DFNS. It also has a social contract and deals with the economy, women's liberation etc. It promises not just equality but an active fight against any form of discrimination and violence against women, in order to encourage the liberation and activism of women in all spheres. This document was also created in the process of discussions with various groups and communities.

In the communes, the same principles of ecology, democracy and women's liberation apply, but more on a face-to-face scale. For example, there exists a kind of self-organized justice system based on a constitution-like document: if there is a dispute in the commune, people solve it with the local peace committee first. They try to solve it there first, and if that does not work they go to the people's house, or the women's house if it is a case of violence against women. If it concerns women's rights, only women can decide upon this case. Only when it's not re-

solved at these direct levels will they go to court. Most of the time, people can resolve their problems face to face. It's about promoting the idea that you, as a society, can solve your problems. You don't need some higher institution.

JS: Are there any security forces in terms of militia? I'm not talking about a military, because it is a war situation, but a kind of democratic police controlled by the commune or by the council?

DD: There are People's Defense Units or YPG (from Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) and Women's Defense Units or YPJ (from Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) that are fighting at the borders and on fronts against ISIS, as well as against Turkey, for example, in occupied Afrin. Then there is an internal security force called Asayish, which means security in Kurdish. People needed a complex security system in the region, mainly because of frequent suicide attacks and other kinds of violence in cities. They deal with terrorist sleeper cells, random violence and looting. A large part of these security forces operate not in war zones but in cities. There is also the women's Asayish. In the cases of violence against women, it's women who go to the house and capture the male perpetrator.

Apart from that, Civilian Defense Forces or HPC (from Kurdish Hêza Parastina Cewherî) were established a few years ago. They are members of the communes who rotate on night watches etc. You have to remember that it's a dangerous place. That's why they need so many people who can watch the neighborhood. When you see the aesthetic of it, it's quite impressive, because many of them are older men and women carrying weapons and wearing vests over their normal clothes. They are watching the neighborhood on a rotating basis. So it's everybody's turn at some point. It's all done locally, not by outsiders—you can be trusted with defending this community because it's your community. In Germany, when we have big demos, local governments import police officers from all over the country. In our Kurdish demo in Cologne, just a few weeks ago, they brought police from various regions. The idea is to anonymize security and establish a distinction between the civils and police officers. The latter will never meet the former again. In the case of Rojava, they meet every day, they are neighbors,

the police officer sometime bakes cakes for people when he is not defending his community.

The rotation mechanism prevents the militarization of communities by people who constantly have weapons. With weapons rotation, everyone has a sense of why it's important to defend and to protect, while preventing the same people from having constant and unmonitored access to weapons for years.

In an academic publication, Turkish sociologist Nazan Üstündag, who went to Rojava, wrote that the more YPG and YPJ became internationalized, the more the local security grew localized. It prevented the sense of a loss of control in the community. I did one interview with the Asayish academy and their training is very interesting. Everybody who gets a weapon needs to get political training. They learn about women's history, ecology and the concept of a democratic nation, to better understand why we are not fighting against another nation, but against an idea like ISIS (they're not fighting against Arabs or Islam, but against fascism). So when they hold their weapons, they know why. They instill an idea of responsibility when holding a weapon. Someone who was teaching at the Asayish academy said that the idea is to have a community where they're not needed anymore. Firstly they want to exist without weapons as tools of resolving conflicts. But ultimately they want to get rid of themselves altogether, so that the community can deal with conflicts on its own. It seems very idealistic now, but that's the perspective at least. Fighters who fight against ISIS and the Turkish state also receive education from women on women's history, on the history of Kurdistan, the history of the Middle East and world politics, to put into context why is this war happening. Instead of just having people with lots of weapons, they want to make them understand why we have them, where they come from, and who is importing them. I think the pedagogy, the training of these people is also important. I'm not idealizing it, because we're talking about people who have lost their entire families, who have seen members of their family being raped. There will still be people who want revenge. There will still be people who abuse their situation. But there is also this incredible system of accountability, of democratic checks and balances. They make sure that if somebody acts wrongly, they are punished for that. The areas controlled by the YPG, YPJ and the later formed Syrian Democratic Forces are the only places where

there is no evidence of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war in Syria.

J

S: Is there any technical platform for discussions and debates? Like an internet forum, some kind of messenger or social media profiles?

D

D: Not really. There's no internet access all the time in the way that people are used to in Europe. People usually have SIM cards from Turkey and can get a signal from there or sometimes from Syria. It's a civil war and all means of communication, however limited, are still tightly controlled by the states. In addition, a lot of engineers and people who have technical expertise fled very early on. But it does not seem to be an important issue or a major limitation. People usually just call each other or engage in direct communication. They do have radios and there have been several radio stations established in the region. Press and media have developed and there are women's radio and TV stations as well women's magazines and newspapers.

J

S: What is the temporal intensity of engagement in this political process? Do you need to participate every day, weekly, monthly?

D

D: It really depends what level we are talking about. Councils meet once a month; their committees meet every two weeks. Their members do the work that is required and then report to each other. Then there are cases where there is a state of emergency so people need to meet every day. For example, when lots of refugees arrive. Problems like that appear on a regular basis and it's not a quiet place where things happen in a routine way. In principle, however, people decide themselves and declare how much time they can commit to this common political process. For example, a woman with a lot of little children would say that she can't come very often to the meetings and people will respect that. So there is no established way of how it's done. Some people have less obligations and can devote more time, others do not have that luxury.

J

S: Do people get paid in any way for public service in communes or in councils? I'm not talking about the parallel official state administration.

D

D: Those who travel to the place where they meet and work

have the costs reimbursed. They receive a small fund for basic needs, a kind of per diem, but it's very basic. Nobody really gets paid extra, including the fighters. They all get the same amount to help them sustain their families. In the communes nobody gets paid, because it's just you being part of your community.

JS: In the text Radical Democracy: The First Line Against Fascism, which you wrote for "Roar Magazine", where you presented Rojava as a bold democratic experiment, you started with a very interesting anecdote. A woman was approached by someone who came to her house talking about the need to organize a commune. She started throwing stones at them. But later she became engaged in the process and it was a kind of self-education that made her change her mind. It reminded me about the documentary that Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis did in Argentina after the 2001 crisis. It's called The Take and tells the story of workers overtaking factories closed by their private owners. There is a female character who says that when she was employed as a regular worker she was coming back home tired and didn't want to engage in anything, but instead she just watched soap operas on TV. When they took over the factory and she was responsible, alongside other workers, for running it, she felt she had something to say and that something depended on her, so she felt a need and a pleasure in educating herself. She started reading Marx and she wanted to learn about the history of workers' movement. Have you seen much of this kind of subjective change among the self-governing people in Rojava? Does exercising power, in terms of direct engagement, change the people implicated in the process?

DD: When people ask if there is a revolution in Rojava, I think it is happening exactly at that level, especially for women and for young people. This painful feeling of being completely useless, having a meaningless existence, being just a producer of babies that cleans the house—all that is gone. Now, especially women have a sense of dignity, of being valuable members of society, of doing something important for the community and the world. I have spoken to a lot of people who feel like that. Interestingly of all ages. One thing that both traditional patriarchy and capital-

ism do to older people is that, when they are too old to be a laborer, they become a burden on society. Now women in their 60s are going to academies where they are learning about concepts and ideas that they have never heard of before. They learn to articulate what they want. Even the act of speaking is important, seeing that your voice has an actual impact. I stayed in an academy like that for one week. It was a one-month education program when women come together to learn, cook, look after the place, do gardening, dance, sing and discuss. They do everything together for one month, having seminars and social activities on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, they build an ad hoc community for that month. Of course, they stay in touch with each other afterwards. In many places young girls and older women share their experiences, learning from one another. It's about evaluating knowledge and putting it to the service of the people. A lot of young women say that they have always thought that they would just sit at home and one day they will get married so they were passively waiting for that to happened. Now, they have become proactive and they even influence other people's lives. They say: „My life? I have so many options in front of me, which I didn't have before. I can be a filmmaker, I can go to an academy, I can be a fighter, I can also be a mother." This complexity of options available to people, of ways of life they can have, has really expanded in an enormous way despite the war.

Going back to the problems of alienation, capitalism and responsibility that are related to this question: I think people like to work if they see that their effort is dedicated to something good for themselves and the community. It boosts your initiative and your individuality. This is creation, so the very essence of what it means to be a human. Whereas, when you work in a machine-like system, then you grow alienated. If you actually make yourself and other people happy by what you are doing, you are eager to assume responsibility. Capitalism is taking away our sense of value. You're only valuable to the extent to which you can produce profit. And if you don't, you're just useless. This impacts our psychology—we feel isolated and lonely.

Once I stayed with an older woman for a few days. She was very busy, always going somewhere. She was doing lots of things and it made her very lively: she would say "Hi!" to everybody on the streets, through her work, her world expanded. This is how you gain a sense of self-confidence and pride. You

can see it in the way people move and speak. It is just so different now. Before they wouldn't even look in a man's eyes, they would look down, but now they hold their heads high. I think in that sense it really expands their universe. Of course there is still conservatism, there are internalized fears, there is stigma. But at least in public, in the political system that they want to establish it is no longer normal that women should be oppressed. The social contract makes it clear, the fighters affirm it, the media, the journalists and activists repeat it every day. Men are proud of women who are strong.

J
S: Before we get to the last thing that I would like to discuss, which is applicability and scalability, I would like to ask you about the most important rifts in the movement. What are the issues that are contested and discussed, particularly in connection with nationalism. We started this conversation with the relationship between emancipation and the nation state project. That's something that I find particularly important in the Polish context, where you can see that there is a need for dignity and recognition among people who would like to be more appreciated and richer, but these aspirations have been completely captured by the nationalistic imagination. I would like to know how you see it from the Rojava perspective. Is it a danger that people talk about or try to counter somehow? If so, then how? And what are the other important rifts in the movement?

D
D: I think that, in the context of Rojava, a much greater danger than nationalism would be liberal individualism. In the Kurdish context, except maybe now for Iraqi Kurdistan, there has never been a possibility of any chauvinistic nationalism due to a lack of power and authority among Kurds. The fragmentation of Kurdish people between four countries has led to a variety of developments, contexts and experiences. The geography and cultural landscape is not very fruitful for nationalism. This is one reason why typical urban nationalism, a new concept for the region, has never been a mass popular idea in Kurdistan. The idea of a united Kurdish nation is very new. In today's international state-normative, capitalist world, the only thing that would, unite Kurdistan is democratic confederalism for the

whole region. It has the potential to bring about a solidary coexistence peoples that respects autonomies and differences based on democratic principles. This would go beyond state borders or notions of intendance in the form of states.

J
S: So it's not a project to cut a part of Turkey, a part of Syria, a part of Iraq and a part of Iran to create a new state.

D
D: No. It's a project to have autonomy in Kurdish regions of those countries and also to democratize these states, to draw them into a system of democracy . This would ideally render state borders obsolete. It is an attempt to overcome nationalisms without denying national features, cultures etc. To create a commonality based on ethics, not ethnicity. This is what Öcalan refers to as "Democratic Nation Solution".

Öcalan's proposals of democratic confederalism are deeply anti-nationalist and anti-statist. The aim is to re-configure the idea of freedom in a more meaningful manner through direct politics and action. From the beginning, the PKK was formed together with Turkish people and there were Turks among its founders as well. It was also a way to pay tribute to Turkish revolutionaries who were killed in 1968. Nationalism has always been something that was considered petit bourgeois. Öcalan's thinking was close to what Rosa Luxemburg thought of national self-determination: its most important components have been workers' unity, women's unity and solidarity of the people against the forces of capital and imperialism. Öcalan believes that a true social revolution that can constitute a democratic revival of the Middle East must be anti-modernist as well, it must be inspired by regional sources of knowledge, wisdom, ethics and politics and democratic, solidary ways of coexistence, rather than mechanically imposing the ideologies and systems of capitalist modernity and European orientalism. We need a new mentality, a new "democratic modernity" to strive for.

J
S: That's very interesting because the Polish lower middle class is one of the most important bastions of nationalism. I would say even more so than people from lower classes. The lower middle class, the petit bourgeois want to be proud of the nation. Lower classes want to have their material problems solved and dealt with. It's pre-

cisely this petit bourgeois that is striving for recognition and pride.

D

D: Rojava's case is special because of ethnic diversity in northern Syria. You have the most ancient Christian communities living there, Yazidis, Alevis, Muslims, Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians and Turkmen. People see how they can nourish each other. That is a why a bigger rift could be the class division. There are obviously different levels of material status and of education in Rojava. War often equalizes these things, but not always. What is worse, liberal bourgeois individualism is not something that necessarily stems from material status. Sometimes it is a psychological phenomenon.

There were many Kurdish businessmen, from all over Kurdistan, who wanted to rebuild Kobanî when it was destroyed. The fighters who died there were revolutionaries and came mainly from the local poor population. These businessmen who want to rebuild it, want to bring capitalism where Kurdish revolutionaries were fighting against fascism in the name of socialist ideals. In Turkey, young Kurdish people from poor neighborhoods dug trenches and built barricades against the state. They were working class revolutionaries and they're imprisoned now. But many elected members of local government were bourgeois. They have been silent.

In my opinion, such class divisions will be among the factors determining the future of Rojava. If capitalism penetrates the fabric of society symbolically as well as materially, then everything will be wasted. There would be no meaningful autonomous organization anymore. In that sense, I think this is a bigger danger than any form of nationalism in Rojava. There is a genuine commitment to solidarity among the common people, but there are different ways in which class can express itself.

The recent recognition that Rojava has enjoyed in the eyes of international media—with the BBC and CNN going there, filming women fighters and taking them seriously—made people feel happy and proud. In the psychology of oppressed people this things mean a lot. But when you think about it, it's the very same media that stood by or even applauded the destruction of Middle East by the war in Iraq in 2003. They come from the same countries that have been providing weapons to all sides of the many conflicts in the region for decades. People

should be aware of that and have more political consciousness of the limited benefits that international recognition brings. However, I do think that few people believed in the genuineness of international powers in the bringing about of peace. Above all, people rely on their own power.

JS: Being at the same time in two traditions and two places—Kurdistan and Europe—do you see any room for transfer of these democratic arrangements from Rojava to the Western context? Or for some practical inspiration at least? People who are interested in radical democracy are looking at Rojava with a lot of hope, awe and inspiration. However, after what you've said, I have a feeling that not everything could be directly transposed or transferred to Europe.

DD: I think in the idea of democratic autonomy—within the philosophy of the Kurdish revolutionary movement—the important thing is that no place is the same. Even in Rojava's system, each village and canton is organized in a slightly different way because there are different ethnic and religious groups or differing economic and geographical conditions. This also means that you cannot compare it to Europe, which is, for example, a much safer place. You cannot equate material, psychological and social conditions, so you cannot simply copy & paste; even within Kurdistan we don't do that.

However, the principles through which people are trying to achieve a sense of dignity and the urge to self-organize are universally human. The bringing out of each individual's power in the act of participating in collective decision-making, becoming a meaningful political agent, having an impact on one's life, the ideas of direct democracy, direct initiative, direct action, as well as the complete commitment to dismantling all forms of oppression and authority, especially against historically oppressed groups like women, young people, old people—all of these things are applicable in a different context. But not this liberal idea that we are all equal and we don't see color and we don't see differences. We should actively make steps that enable these different groups to autonomously organize and bring out their collective identities, but also to democratize them internally and to give space for the individual realization of identity.

Treating society as an ecological system, a dynamic force, a history-making and world-creating force, rather than a machine—that is a universally human attitude. The same is true when we talk about labor or our relation to nature. If we look at human history as a whole from the perspective of freedom, we will see how racism, sexism and colonialism are linked with each other. I think an analysis of history will then bring us back to this universal form of counter-organizing.

What capitalism, patriarchy and states are doing is saying that there is no alternative. This is a neoliberal policy, it's actually a slogan of neoliberalism, that there is no alternative. People just start to believe that. If you tell them, through education or through the media, that resistance is something that can only be consumed passively in hero movies and subcultures with printed t-shirts, then this is the furthest you can go. Capitalism, especially its surveillance culture and technology really limits our vision. And I think that this is why we need to remind ourselves that people have resisted, people shed their blood and gave their life for a different reality. We need to respect that and we need to keep that legacy going. You find it in some form or another in most places around the world. It is not a kind of knowledge that needs to be imported.

It actually is not that difficult, as long as basic things are explained to people in a transparent manner that everyone can understand. We need to fight against confining this knowledge to the limits of elitist institutions; we need to share that with the people; we need to make it more transparent and accessible. So many ordinary people agree that the system is so bad and something needs to change, but they feel hopeless. I think it's everybody's role to do something, to make sure this happens.

I want to give an example, also as a kind of wrapping up to what we were talking about. In August 2014, when the Yazidi Kurdish community was attacked in Sinjar in Iraq, the Iraqi Kurdish forces that were in the area withdrew and ran away faster than the wind. Many were killed. It was the guerrillas of the PKK from the mountains and the fighters from Rojava that came and fought a corridor to save tens of thousands of Yazidis. Why? Because they didn't wait for political approval, they just came and did it through their direct decision. The people that I interviewed one year after the massacre were saying that the massacre happened because they didn't understand why this

was happening. They didn't understand why the Iraqi Kurdish forces ran away and why ISIS was coming. They were not informed, they simply didn't know what they were up against. One year after the massacre, they have organized themselves, with women forming the women's council and forming women's autonomous fighting units.

One month after the August attack on the Yazidis, Kobanî was attacked in Syria. And there the same kind of people, also Kurdish people, also mostly poor people, waited for ISIS with weapons. They knew what was happening, they knew they needed to defend themselves, they knew that nobody was going to come and rescue them. They say that they know why this was happening. It's all about political consciousness.

So why did the many communities get killed in such large numbers? Because they didn't have any political organization—they weren't prepared. In Kobanî, on the other hand, there had been an established culture of resistance. Now this culture of resistance has reached the Yazidis and many other communities, especially women. It's up to awareness, knowledge and understanding of the system, connecting the dots.

J
S: People in Europe are much more educated and they have the tools to understand the situation; however, their reaction to neoliberalism has been reluctant—it took them some time to realize that there is no trickle-down, that this is all ideological bullshit, that mostly the rich are getting richer and that we need to self-organize. This is where Indignados, Occupy movement and later Syriza or Podemos have come from. Unfortunately, there is also a lot of trust placed in nationalism and nationalistic projects as a way of saving us from neoliberalism. But I don't think it's going to work.

D
D: The problem is that the West is much more individualistic. You have the luxury to simply withdraw, if you don't like something. Under neoliberalism in Europe, you can continue your existence somehow. If you don't feel that your life, your dignity, your community depends on political engagement you can just say: „Whatever! I'm going to be an apolitical person." This is a luxury that many people have. But it shouldn't be the case, especially when it is all of humanity that is facing ecological catastrophe

DILAR
DIRIK

JAN
SOWA

J
S: I think it's an illusion that you can distance yourself from the consequences of capitalism. It's a fantasy popular among people living in the West, especially from the middle and upper class, because they have more resources. If you are gifted, you see that there are cracks in this system. Individuals with talents and initiative are offered individual careers. That's a very corruptive aspect of neoliberal capitalism. But still the dream of purely individual and disconnected happiness remains a fantasy. At some point it's going to get to you, in one form or another: debt, limited life chances, pollution, climate change, antibiotics and hormones in food or something else. I don't think this individualistic isolationist position is tenable in the long run. D

D: Of course, I agree that it is not tenable, but people still have these kinds of illusions. I think this is why, in the past, there were so many more people willing to organize and fight for something. They didn't feel disconnected and they knew that they depended on the communities they lived in. They didn't have this option of withdrawing to some safe heaven. Now we are so anonymized and so individualized under neoliberalism that you actually can benefit from this fascist system. But it will not work in the long run, as we are starting to see in Europe, with new waves of fascism and right-wing extremism. We need to rediscover our embeddedness in the community, and to learn how to draw political power from it. This is what everyone can learn from Rojava, no matter where they live, what religion they practice or what their skin color is.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANNA PAWLUŚKIEWICZ AND JAKUB ROK

DEMOCRACY FOR THE FOREST

JAN SOWA: If you were to describe the Camp for the Forest in as few words as possible, what would you say?

JOANNA PAWLUŚKIEWICZ: The Camp for the Forest is a social movement rather than an NGO; there are other NGOs working for the preservation of the Białowieża Forest. The coalition I Love the Forest (Polish: *Kocham Puszczę*—editor's note) was also formed, but our camp was first set up in May 2017 as a symbol of protest from the citizens against the treatment of the Białowieża Forest by the Ministry and the Directorate General of the National Forests.

JS: Whose initiative was it?

JP: Whenever anyone asks who organized the Camp, we answer: Jan Szyszko (the then-Polish Minister of Environment—translator's note) (laughs). I think it has to be said that Jan Szyszko, in a completely unintended way, triggered incredible social activism in Poland and contributed to people getting together and setting up the Camp. We are very grateful to the Minister for that (laughs).

But seriously, it is quite hard to say who initiated the Camp. It was partly the Wild Poland Foundation (Polish: *Fundacja Dzika Polska*—editor's note), and partly other activists working in the Białowieża Forest area and defending it for many years. But the group that gathered there found a plot of land in a nearby town, Pogorzelce, whose owner agreed to let us set up camp there. It was a regular plot with a few barns and farm buildings, nothing else. Electric power was brought from neighbors who supported the idea of turning the entire Forest into a national park.

JAN SOWA
JAKUB ROK

JS: How did the larger, more professional NGOs react to the appearance of a social movement like the Camp for the Forest? I have some experience of NGOs in the cultural field and it seems to me that professionalization and channeling of all the social activities into NGOs is something negative. In fact, this has been proven by research, especially in the North American context. The term "governmentalization" was coined, which means bringing the third sector under the control of the government. These organizations take specific actions, depending on the subsidies and the political climate. The commercialization of NGOs, which become similar to companies, is another problem, as can be seen in the publishing sector.

I wanted to ask specifically about your relationship with Greenpeace. It is a different organization, supported by membership fees and donations, which means it is not dependent on governments or the private sector. I have heard stories, however, about tensions between the Camp for the Forest and Greenpeace. Could you say something about that? And also, about relationships with other such organizations if there were any.

JAKUB ROK: Greenpeace and WWF[1] are the largest organizations forming part of the I Love the Forest coalition. Apart from them, there are four organizations operating in Poland only. The Camp constantly collaborates with the coalition. Coordination is important. We see our activities as complementary rather than competitive. Out of the six organizations, Greenpeace's model is to operate on-site. There are other organizations, such as ClientEarth, that solely dedicate themselves to legal battles. They were the ones who prepared the motion for the European institutions to bring Poland to justice for logging in the Forest. Greenpeace's volunteers have a more direct approach; we, inevitably, have much more contact with them as a result of this. At the moment,[2] in winter, the place where we

1 World Wide Fund for Nature, established in 1961, is an international non-governmental organization acting for the protection of wild natural areas and a reduction in the human impact on environment. It was previously called the World Wide Fund, hence the shortcut; the old name is still in use in the US and Canada. (editor's note).

2 The interview was conducted in February 2018. Here and later expressions such as "at the moment", "currently" or similar, refer to that time (editor's note).

are staying is the headquarters of both the Camp and Greenpeace, so we are working at close quarters. Given how many potential conflicts there could be, I'd say our collaboration is quite harmonious.

If there are any tensions, they are more of an organizational nature and come from the differences in the way we function. We follow a democratic, egalitarian model, and they have a hierarchical structure. In their case, the decisions come from the top so they often see our actions as hasty, unreasonable or rash. On the other hand, they are prepared to admit that an action was good and to support us with their organization or superior media relations.

JP: I suppose that the appearance of such a sizeable movement as the Camp for the Forest has come as a surprise to some non-governmental organizations. Everyone knew what they are about, and suddenly there is this new entity that is not an NGO and that works like a forest in nature; it grows and does what it wants. There are trees of different ages, there is rot and madness. Organizations with a stable structure simply work differently. As time goes by, however, we are learning to work together. We collaborate much more closely now with the Coalition than in the summer. We took direct action then and we carried out some of them with Greenpeace; often the blockades. The last blockade together was on Wilcza Tryba. It is a very important place in the Białowieża Forest and the blockade lasted 16 days. The first blockade of a harvester and forwarder machines was also carried out with Greenpeace.

Whenever any conflicts or tensions arise, you have to remember it is a first attempt to form such a collective subject. There are no precedents for us to follow; no one has ever done anything like this. For instance, Greenpeace and other organizations do not participate at all in the blockade in Hambacher Forest,[3] which has lasted for so many years. Here we are constantly creating new standards among

3 Hambacher Forst – an ancient forest in North Rhine-Westphalia. It is one of the last places where the ecosystem of this part of Europe has remained unchanged since the last ice age. The forest has been occupied by ecological organization since 2014 in a protest against its destruction by nearby brown coal mines (editor's note).

our organizations. When we write letters to politicians, it is done together.

JS: When deciding about setting up the Camp for the Forest, were you inspired by any similar Polish or international cases?

JR: Though maybe there are only a few such camps in the world, they do exist. One that is operating against the logging operations in the Hambacher Forest in Germany, just near the border with Belgium, is now five years old. RWE has strip mines there and for five years people have been active in the area, living in the trees. A camp in France, set up by the opponents of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport, has been around for 20 years.[4] It has existed for so long that a whole new generation of activists has been born and raised there. The camp has its own restaurants, schools, etc. Ans they achieved success in the end—the news appeared a few days ago that another pointless airport will not be built there. They won after 20 years.

4 Notre-Dame-des-Landes – a commune in the Loire-Atlantique department in France, where the plans to build a giant Aéroport du Grand Ouest have been opposed since 2012. The camp, called Zone à Défendre (literally: Zone to be Defended, shortcut – ZAD) established by the activists is one of the most interesting anarchist utopias in Europe (editor's note).

JP: Some of the larger organizations in Poland that were involved in conservation were the defenders of Góra Świętej Anny, Tama Tamie, then the camp set up in the Rospuda Valley and finally, our own Camp for the Forest. I think that what sets us apart is that people from very different circles—not only activists—gathered here.

JS: Speaking of this, who are you by day, when not defending the Forest?

JP: I, for instance, work in the field of improvisational theater and scriptwriting. Other defenders of the Białowieża Forest have different jobs—from engineers to storytellers, yoga instructors, musicians, artists and IT experts. It is an organically created group of people who have come to the forest, even without previous experience in activism or direct action. In fact, such direct action as blocking machines in the forest was novel for me. There are, of course, anti-hunting activists and others—biologists, teachers, botanists, etc.

JS: That must give you quite a scope for action.

JR: That is true. We can do more than just take direct action. We started like that, but soon expanded to organizing forest walks with biologists, film screenings, concerts and other meetings. Perhaps that is why it is still going on, and why it has become a sort of movement, rather than a mere protest camp in Pogorzelce. It is a movement that works with the local community and is present at various conferences, like the one organized by Biennale Warszawa in February 2018. People invite us and want to hear about what we do. It is fantastic, something really special has been born.

JS: Where do you get the money to support the camp and organize protests?

JR: From the beginning, the camp supports itself through donations, not only financial but also material ones. We have a continually-updated list of items we need, such as warm clothing, cameras, office equipment. Everything comes from donors, even the food. A group called Weki dla Puszczy (English: Pots for the Forest) exists in Warsaw and they bring us food every two weeks. We got vegetables all through the summer, and now we are working with bakeries also. There is a bakery in Hajnówka, for instance, that is against logging, so they give us food. The money we raised through two crowdfunding events has been allocated for legal aid, which we desperately need, as we are currently dealing with about 140 misdemeanor, civil and criminal cases.[5] It takes a lot of money. The law office representing us needs to be paid, so we are constantly raising funds.

5 By the end of 2018, the total number of cases brought against the Camp for the Forest activists by the Police and State Forests had reached around 500 (editor's note).

JS: Is such a mass mobilization of different groups an indication of the popularity of environmental values in Polish society?

JR: I have my own opinion about environmental movements in Poland. I am speaking personally here, not in the name of our Camp. Some decades ago, the environmental

movement began with opposition based on mass mobilization and often resorted to direct action. We mentioned the actions related with Góra Świętej Anny, for instance, or the protests in Czorsztyn. Then, the movement gradually became more specialized and professional—mass protests and direct action gave way to non-governmental organizations and—with time—large, international organizations such as Greenpeace arrived. Their professionalism consisted in making good use of legislation for the defense of the environment. For instance, if we see that the Augustów beltway will cross the Rospuda valley, we will look for specific laws that will help us prove it illegal. This strategy is very efficient as long as you are convinced the law is right. But there comes a case where the law does not provide such support. We can invoke the laws, yes, but they can be changed too. In such situations, we need to seek support for our demands in a wider social mobilization that such environmental groups were not able to organize due to that same specialization and professionalization. A niche appeared that was filled by the Camp for the Forest, i.e. an open group—if you see what is going on in the Białowieża Forest and are bothered by that, then come over and protest with us. Do not just donate money, wear a pin or change your profile picture on Facebook—come over and get involved directly, to let out your frustration, but also to create that social network that can later prove effective as a social movement.

JS: Is not working with such a varied group more challenging than in a specialized NGO, though?

JR: It was our priority from the very beginning to include in the Camp rules the fact that it is not only a grass-roots group, made up of people who get there and coexist, but also that it is not hierarchical. That means that the camp has no leader, no one to manage the others. At a certain point, a few months into the existence of the camp, it became clear that the initial proposition that we were going to freely work together with no coordination and leadership does not mean that there is no need for some structure and decision-making processes. It was something that also emerged in the process.

JS: So how did it work in practice?

JR: The daily general assemblies have become the main-decision making body. Because we all lived together in the same place, we could meet by the campfire every evening to look back at the day's events and talk about what we wanted to do next. Obviously, if a decision needed to be made instantly it was different; for example, when someone let us know a harvester machine was felling trees in a given location, we could not hold a gathering and make the decision together. There needed to be a group that was in charge of making such a decision. The very nature of the camp stipulated that it should be a base for direct action taken to protect the forest. We agreed that, when it comes to felling trees that are over 100 years old, direct action can be taken. But whether we take it or not in a given moment depends on the person who was chosen during the general assembly to be in charge of patrol coordination. This person collects information from eye-witnesses and makes a decision based on that. They evaluate whether enough people are available at a given moment to take such action, whether it is safe for these people to go to the location of the harvester, etc.

JS: So apart from the general assembly, you do have smaller, more specialized units to coordinate the activities of the camp, such as patrol organization, is that right?

JP: There are a few areas that require regular, quite specialized involvement, such as legal or media affairs, as well as scientific, IT and economic matters. Work groups deal with these. Everybody can join one, depending on their skills. It is important, however, that this person stay with us long-term, because such things take time. For instance, a legal work group was formed with three members initially, but it soon turned out that they could not handle everything and needed more people. Currently, that group is made up of seven volunteers. We share the group's responsibilities; sometimes a trip to Warsaw is necessary; just today I took civil case documents there. There is also a media work group and both Kuba

and myself are part of it. Running our Facebook profile is a daily task too, since it is our main means of communication. There is a long-term plan there, but every major strategic decision is consulted with the whole work group and—for the most important matters—the Council is involved.

JR: Precisely, the Council is another element of the Camp's organization. Currently, it consists of maybe 35 people, but it is constantly changing. A place on the Council is not held for life, nor is the Council closed to new members. The condition of becoming part of it is to declare that a person can dedicate a certain amount of their time to the activities for the Forest. If someone becomes unable to fulfill that commitment, they can withdraw from the council. At the same time, people with more time available and some Camp experience appear who can become part of it.

JS: What is the purpose of the Council?

JR: Since we have been operating for seven or eight months already, many various strategic decisions must be taken; granted that the harvester machines have been withdrawn, Mr. Szyszko is gone, as is Mr. Tomaszewski (the Director of State Forests—translator's note), which means that many of the goals we initially set have been fulfilled. But we are still quite a long way away from our main goal, the reason for the existence of the Camp, which is to make the entire Białowieża Forest a national park. This means considering where to direct our actions, how to structure them on a daily basis in order to come as close as possible to that goal. Strategic planning is necessary for this, rather than a mere intention to act. This is why the Council exists.

JS: So it is about a certain stability and a broader, longer-term perspective, is not it?

JR: Indeed. A major practical issue is the rotation of people involved in the Camp, which exists thanks to those who volunteer their time. Many of them have to go back to their cities every now and then to earn their living, although we do have quite a few members who spend half their time with us, or even live in the forest for 75% of their time, going back for the remainder of it. There are different levels of involvement. Between 600 and 1000

people have passed through the camp in its existence. Some came for two days, some settled to live here. Being on-site, where it is all happening, is a really crucial aspect of what we do. So we agreed that people who live in the camp have more say in what goes on there. We do not even have a platform that would involve everyone who passed through the camp in making decisions.

JS: Has this model proved effective?

JP: The Council works really well. It is also based on democratic principles because it is constantly growing, which happens naturally. If someone leaves for two months to work abroad, they transfer their place to another person. Thanks to the internet, the Council can also communicate on other platforms, though we meet in the Forest quite regularly.

Rotation is, in fact, an issue. If an expert at creating websites has three days off and comes to this strange entity, which the Camp for the Forest is, it is hard for them to immediately join the IT work group. That person would not have enough time. They would just about start something and then disappear.

JS: How does that relate to the non-hierarchical principle? The Council and work groups have, in fact, some power and only some of the members of the Camp for the Forest are part of them, I would even say a tiny minority.

JR: I see non-hierarchicality as a process, rather than a state. Uneven rotation (the fact that some people spend only a few days in the Camp whereas others stay for several weeks) leads to some form of hierarchy. The question is to what extent our structure strengthens or weakens it. We do not have representative bodies where someone is elected. A person can simply volunteer to participate in a given activity, as long as they can commit enough time so that their participation is effective in the long-term. Pragmatic as it may be, it really works.

JS: How were you received by the locals?

JP: They call us ecologists, of course, with that meaningful pause before the word. I call it "the syncope of hatred" (laughs).

We are fighting to change that stereotype. That is why we are always there and live there, also to avoid giving the impression of a bunch of freaks showing up and doing God-knows-what.

Białowieża is the epicenter, but three other villages are important: Pogorzelce, Teremiski and Budy. The Camp was based in Pogorzelce. We started by meeting the provost, who was replaced with another after two weeks of the Camp's inauguration. It turned out that the new provost was completely on our side and working together became so much easier. We involved the neighbors in organizational matters: we rented a plot of land from one woman to park cars on; we helped another find a home for her kittens. Those were normal things, nothing weird or artificial, no plans that we were going to show up and "save" the local community. It just happened naturally. We were soon accepted in Pogorzelce. With a population of 47 it was not that hard.

At the moment we are staying in Teremiski, which is a bit different. There are more inhabitants and a few sawmills, which obviously leads to some conflicts. We are slowly starting to communicate with our new neighbors. There is a man who has a guesthouse and he absolutely despises us. One of our colleagues went there recently and he said: "Oh, finally a normal person coming from these ecologists."

JS: Did you experience any hostility or attacks from the locals?

JP: Initially we had to deal with some reports filed by various enemies of the Camp. There were times when we were accused of stealing vegetables from someone's garden. We offered to install a camera trap to prove we were not the thieves. Someone else claimed we broke some branches at a woodpecker's nest, but it later turned out that some mad photographer was the culprit.

The Camp was searched for drugs and similar annoyances. They did not find anything so the whole matter was very good for us as the news went public. There is a prohibition throughout the camp—no alcohol nor drugs, which soon made people accept us. Of course there are unpleasant situations, but nothing dramatic happened over the summer. There was talk about Narodowa Hajnówka (a nationalist organization in the eponymous town—translator's note) showing up

and roughing us up, but nobody came, so perhaps we are not that invasive.

It is worth mentioning that the locals are also organizing themselves against what the Government wants to do to the Forest. There is an association, Locals Against Logging, that works very actively. It is not like everyone is against the so-called ecologists. It is going quite well; we have prepared a free educational offer for various centers and schools and we are increasingly trying to work with the local community and institutions.

JS: That is quite intriguing, because from the confrontation between the ecological movement and the populist Polish authorities, one could conclude that the ecologists are the representatives of the elites hostile towards the ordinary citizen, ironically speaking.

JR: It is true that there have been clear attempts to make the ecologist into public enemy number one. They are described as outsiders, part of the city elite, even perhaps funded by someone and imposing their will on other people. A sort of demonization. But because the Camp for the Forest is present in a continuous and permanent way, we became like neighbors and that humanized us in a way. Coming into direct contact often helps debunk prejudice and stereotypes.

JS: The way I see it, there are three sides here: the local community, the ecological movement and the authorities.

JR: That is true and the third side, the authorities, is in fact the biggest issue. It is them who promote the narrative about the ecologist being the public enemy. It has partly succeeded, because there will always be those who buy into this kind of cliché. The camp itself has been harassed too. The above-mentioned raid by police officers in balaclavas searching the Camp was one example. We have been fined several times for walking on the wrong side of the road or for riding without bike lights in the middle of the day. As Asia mentioned, 140 people have court cases. It all goes to show that this social movement does not

sit well with the government, and they are trying to get to us by inventing excuse after excuse.

J

S: Are you able to defend yourselves in any way against this type of harassment?

J

R: The vastness of the support network for the Camp works to our advantage. Even if at the moment we number a dozen or so people, its fate matters to a far larger group. Thanks to that, we find it easier to raise the alarm when bad things happen, and that makes the Government back down. For example, that was the case with the arbitrary fines for bike riding.

J

S: What was that about?

J

R: They fined us for biking on forest roads that are off-limits only for cars. Or for riding through a section of the Green Velo Trail that was theoretically under construction, but there were no no-entry signs by the connecting roads.

That was a big issue for us, because we use bikes to patrol the Forest, checking for any logging activity. We would not have the same range on foot. It caught many people's attention, as well as the media, and thanks to that social indignation, the police stopped harassing us. It plainly shows that, with mass mobilization and an issue going beyond a particular group's interests, it is possible to somewhat restrain the Government and its attempts at control.

J

S: One of the well-known narratives spread by the Government said that the protests were funded by Soros' foundation and that the activists received money for taking action. Did you come across such opinions there in the Forest?

J

P: Yes, there were attempts to discredit what we do. We heard various rumors about our price lists. We saw the alleged sums change. This black PR is conducted quite cleverly, actually. At the beginning the sums were exorbitant, for instance that we get 300 zlotys per day in the camp, 700 for chaining ourselves to a harvester machine and a bonus for talking to the media. Then they gave very specific sums, for example 26 zlo-

tys gross per hour of bike patrol. It was extremely unpleasant because these amounts came up in conversations with forest rangers during their interventions or with some journalists. People asked us: "Why you are not denying these allegations? Why you are not talking about it on the Camp's Facebook page?" We came to the conclusion that it would not make any sense to pay any attention to it, but—in fact—the locals often quoted these sums. They could not understand how we could be there for free. But I think that with our attitude and perseverance and because they know we have to go back to, say, Warsaw to earn some money, we managed to curb those rumors.

JS: You mentioned the general assembly as the main body in the camp's structure. Could you talk about how it proceeds? Even though it is a meeting at the campfire, I imagine there are some formalities and specific procedures—bringing in discussion topics, making decisions, solving conflicts. How does such a gathering look?

JR: There is always a chair, responsible for moderating the assembly. We choose them among ourselves or from volunteers. If any non-Polish speakers are present, we always select the person to interpret, as the camp's reach goes beyond Poland. There are often people who do not speak Polish. Then, if there are many newcomers, we have a getting-to-know-you round where everyone can introduce themselves. In the end, apart from making decisions, we live together so it is nice to get to know each other. It is the only time when we can get together at ease. It is also the time to collect items for the agenda and depending on what is put forward; we later discuss it in that order. As far as making the actual decisions is concerned, we have a rule that allows 3 types of vote. You can be in favor of a solution, against it and not block its implementation, and finally against it and prevent it from being carried out. We have a rule that if someone uses the veto vote, it must be somehow based on the Camp's values. You cannot just say: "Because I say so!", but rather: "No, because I think it stands in contradiction to our democratic principle or against the principle of non-violence." I did not mention it before but

that is another rule: we operate without violence. So by invoking these values you can veto a decision. That applies both in the Council meetings and during the gatherings.

JS: Is there a document, a sort of constitution, where all these rules are written down?

JR: When the Camp was set up, its objectives were established, along with some basic rules. The goals constituted the reason for our existence and referred directly to the Białowieża Forest. Our overarching aim was to extend the area of the National Park. The four short-term goals included removing harvester machines from the forest, lifting the no-entry ban imposed by State Forests, cease logging during the bird nesting season, as well as in forest stands which are over 100 years old. The rules, on the other hand, regulated how the camp works and what it is. They included the principle of non-violence or the gathering as the decision-making body.

JP: It took us hours to devise the structure for the Camp's functioning and organize the work groups. We did it together so the meetings about how we were going to work lasted about 6 hours each. The structure of the work groups had to be designed, etc. Kuba, for instance, brought it all together to present it to the others, but everyone had to agree to it. There was no one person to make that decision; everyone had to accept the structure.

JS: Were different people assigned a scope of responsibilities? Or was everyone expected to define their role themselves?

JP: There is a set of tasks which needs to be performed daily in the camp. It is equally important and always discussed in the gatherings: who will make breakfast or lunch or who will clean the house. Apart from protecting the Białowieża Forest, we also do regular chores; cleaning, fixing bikes, patrolling. There is a set of must-do daily tasks. We agree on the time to have breakfast, usually 7:30 or 8:00 a.m., a bit later on weekends. Then we split up—one group goes on patrol, another deals with journalists who need to be shown around the logging trail, yet another distributes leaflets. We share these

duties; people can volunteer for each and say how they can contribute. The rule is: you can live in the camp as long as you pitch in. You cannot just show up and do nothing. If you want to stay, you will have certain duties. Everyone does what they can.

JS: What is the hardest thing about such direct democracy? What kind of conflicts and problems are the most common?

JR: Surprisingly, the hottest issue was that of dogs in the camp; more specifically, whether they are allowed inside the house. It probably took the most time to discuss in the gatherings. It is a matter of values: should dogs live in the same conditions as humans or not. Dogs are number one topic in the camp, children—number two.

JP: Getting to understand that model was very tricky for me personally. I have worked on film sets most of my life and they are extremely hierarchical. I have to constantly remind myself not to be such a despot, which I am liable to. Having been a film producer for so long, it is hard to switch to the community mode. I have recently realized that such concepts already exist, for instance Sławomir Idziak's idea to make films in a democratic way. We tried to do it in film schools but it always ended up in fierce arguments. It did not work in the film world. I learn a lot here about how to get rid of old habits from other fields. When I manage to do it, I feel great. For example, I declared dogs should not be allowed in the house some time ago that because they get in the way of our work and I was accused of speciesism. At first I thought it was nonsense but later came to realize I was in fact guilty of it. Being part of such a community and experiencing direct democracy in the flesh is incredibly enlightening. For most of those used to working in hierarchical structures it should even be compulsory. It really makes it possible to work with people rather than fake equality.

JS: Let me quickly go back to the relations with the local community. At the beginning you mentioned the Zone à Défendre in France and their protest against the construction of an airport. What happened there was that many in-

terests and aims converged, both those of activists and the local residents. Neither of them wanted that airport. In a critical moment when the camp was to be removed, the farmers surrounded it with tractors and blocked the eviction. Do you think a similar synergy could emerge here in the Forest if the situation comes to the crunch?

JR: We have not reached a point yet where we could count on such support yet. I believe things are getting better, though. Nonconformity is increasing in the local community, which makes it possible to think about breaking away from the main power center dictating the idea of what the forest is and how its economy should be managed. I am referring to the lumber industry. As tourism grows and becomes a viable economic alternative, more and more people have their own independent vision of the forest and of the relationship of humans with nature. As far as particular interests are concerned, it is hard to compare it with the airport situation in France or with fracking in Zamojszczyzna. It was a clear case of the not-in-my-backyard phenomenon. Here, forestry is a way of life and an area of the economy which has been deeply rooted in the local communities for the last 100 years. Many of them emerged because of it. For instance, Hajnówka is a logging town. This way of life and ethos are deeply ingrained even though it is not as economically relevant as it used to be some decades ago. Hajnówka is a small town in eastern Poland and its industry declined in the wake of the Polish transformation in the 1990s. The economic interests opposed to conservation efforts are still there but they affect a relatively small group of people—about 150 are employed in 3 forest divisions and another 150 work in sawmills and in forestry operations. These groups are quite powerful, though, because they have a lot of support. Just compare the budget and authority of State Forests with those of the local governments. Foresters have seats in local governments and State Forests have enough resources to decide which roads will be paved. Thanks to that they have a lot of say in local politics. A district for-

ester earns 16,500 zlotys a month, an income which ensures influence in eastern-Polish communities.

JP: Not all locals realize that a forest complex such as Białowieża is not a national park in its entirety. On top of that, there is a strict reserve area within the national park in the Białowieża Forest, which makes many locals believe that if the whole Forest becomes a national park, it will also automatically become a strict reserve, meaning entry will be forbidden altogether. Lots of myths and legends have built up in the local community, with the peculiar forester ethos to the top of that. Many people have a forester in the family. We do not have full knowledge of them and their employer, the State Forests, which we should have as a society. It is a giant corporation earning big money all across the country; a corporation which manages vast lands, literally a quarter of Poland's territory. State Forests are a very interesting structure, with its administration, officials and guards, which has powers similar to those of the police. We do not fully realize how powerful a company it is and what the Camp for the Forest is up against. The protest we organized in the General Directorate of the State Forests headquarters in Warsaw is our biggest problem. They were shocked we left the forest and came to Warsaw. They accused us of disturbing domestic peace, which is utter nonsense. How can domestic peace be disturbed in a public institution which belongs to all of us? We got arrested for that.

JR: 23,000 people work for State Forests and they are not only forest workers who do manual labor in the field. The vast majority of them are administrative personnel. The average salary in State Forests is 8,000 zlotys gross, and the yearly revenue amounts to 8 billion zlotys. Note that for this giant institution, the Białowieża Forest is economically meaningless—it constitutes 0.6% of all areas under the management of State Forests. It is made up of 3 forest districts staffed by a mere 150 of those 23,000 employees. On top of that State Forests have to subsidize these districts with 20 million zlotys just to keep the lights on. If this organization was solely financially motivated, they would have agreed to make the entire Forest a National Park. But what matters here are the political, symbolic and

ethical aspects. The very core of the forester's ethos states that a forest exists thanks to our intervention, whereas the basic principle of those defending the Białowieża Forest is to protect it from human interference.

J S: It is indeed quite a complicated situation. The question emerges which strategy can be the more effective—is it better to put pressure locally, working on-site, just like the Camp for the Forest does or should a nationwide movement be created with the aim of changing state legislation. What is your take on that?

J R: Some time ago, in 2012 or 2011 perhaps, an action called "Give the nation its parks back" was organized which managed to collect 250,000 signatures. This citizen legislative proposal put forward changes in the constitution of national parks. Since 2001, the local community must agree to extend the area of a national park or to establish one. No new parks were created or significantly extended in Poland since that amendment was passed. It is a major obstacle.

J S: Are the foresters and their influence on local governments to blame?

J R: Not necessarily direct, personal influence, at least not in the case of the Białowieża Forest. As we said before, 150 foresters work in this area and 40,000 people inhabit it. The economic significance of forestry is decreasing, but the history and the emotional involvement still hold some sway. The local inhabitants, however, are no longer that dependent on forestry.

J P: What supports the idea of extending the national park area is the fact that since May, when the first bans on entering the forest were introduced, the locals saw a drastic decline in the numbers of tourists and started losing money. As it turned out, the tourist industry had been developing in the area for some time, then the harvester machines showed up and things fell apart. People are warming up to the idea of a national park because it is more profitable for the region then logging and embarrassing Poland on the global stage. I must

say that the situation was greatly helped by the decision of the European Court of Justice and all the turmoil around the government's actions. The extension of the National Park area, though, cannot happen without the approval of the local community. That is why we are there, willing to work together. Apart from that, it is these people who are going to live there and benefit from it. That is the key. Economic arguments are all well and good but all these people need to see why extending the area of national park is worth it.

JR: Up to now, the forestry side had a monopoly on shaping the opinions on the question of national park. There were times when foresters handed out leaflets and went door to door, talking with the local inhabitants and scaremongering them about the national park. They used false arguments saying there would be a ban on picking forest fruits and a shortage of firewood for the locals. All this despite the fact that the project of extension of Białowieża National Park prepared by an expert group advising Lech Kaczyński plainly states that the vast majority of the forest will be freely accessible. Picking blueberries and mushrooms will be allowed and wood will be obtained for use by the local community, so—in fact—firewood will be available.

JS: Apart from matters related to tourism which you just mentioned, are there any other issues important to the local community, which could affect the efforts to extend the national park?

JP: Actually yes, the forestry goliath has shot itself in the foot by introducing harvester machines, thus taking away any potential work from the local lumberjacks. Instead of a team of ten or twenty local lumberjacks, one man from Giżycko operated the harvester machine and another man, also from Giżycko manned the forwarder machine. It was not as plain and clear to people until they were directly affected. The wood for local needs is brought in from the Knyszyńska Forest whereas the material acquired in the Białowieża forest is used, for example, for construction of the road from Krakow to Zakopane in the Małopolska province. Some company called Trak-Drew from Podhale buys the wood from the Białowieża Forest. I felt a change in the relations with the in-

habitants of the areas where logging is taking place when a car mechanic told me to keep blocking those harvester machines, because they are no good for anybody—the forest is destroyed, none of the locals makes any money off of it, tourism is declining and there is no wood available to buy anyway. For me it was a sign that people are catching on to the pointlessness of the logging.

JS: Has the local church taken a stand? Jan Szyszko and his lobby are known to have strong ties to the Church, especially the circles connected with Radio Maryja (a religious and political socially-conservative Polish radio station—translator's note). Have you tried to get in touch with the local parish priest? The Church must hold some sort of symbolic authority there.

JR: We have made some attempts. The region is quite Orthodox, so we spoke with both Catholic and Orthodox priests. Some of them were quite open to dialogue, while others are quite tied in with the local elites who support logging. I imagine they realize it is quite a politically-charged topic and try to avoid talking about it. They fear being reprimanded by their superiors. Some people from the Camp went to Sunday mass in the local church and told us the priest never mentioned the subject of logging, despite it being quite public at the time.

We had a meeting with Father Duszkiewicz, Szyszko's personal friend and the chaplain of the Regional Directorate of the State Forests in Białystok. By the way, it is worth mentioning that State Forests employ 40 priests with handsome salaries. Father Duszkiewicz has a lynx hide in his house; a species which is protected in Poland. He showed up at one of the blockades to tease us a bit. As soon as he arrived and got into a shouting match with someone, the police turned up to arrest that person. They were accused of assaulting a priest and the news spread through all the media tied to the regime with the headline "eco-terrorists assault a priest". The priest initially said someone knocked the phone out of his hand but a day later arrived at the police station with his arm in a sling.

JS: At one time there was a plan to call for a boycott of the companies buying timber logged in the Białowieża Forest. A list of such companies was made and posted on the web. Was it at all effective? Did you get any reaction from these companies?

JR: The problem is sawmills generally do not supply timber directly to consumers, so it is not that we can convince them to buy a different table by raising citizen awareness. Action needs to be taken at an earlier stage. The timber industry has certificates stating how the forest from which the wood comes is managed. They are quite significant, especially because the Polish timber industry is focused on exports. To an international consumer, it matters little whether the Euro-pallets they are buying are made from timber coming from the Białowieża Forest, but rather if it is FSC or PEFC certified. We managed to take away the FSC certificate from the wood originating from the Białowieża Forest, but it still has the PEFC certification[6]. So far, because of the reservations expressed, PEFC advises against purchasing wood from this region. I think the pressure on the supply chain matters and can ultimately have a strong effect.

I have to admit, though, that personally I was a bit disappointed with the wood certification process. What is going on in the Białowieża Forest should be alarming enough to have the certificate taken away from State Forests. Since the PEFC certificate was about to expire, State Forests needed to renew it. In order to do so, an auditor had to be found. None came forward, knowing they would be in a double bind: you either get in State Forests' bad books by denying them the certificate or offend the truth. In the end, the Bureau of Technical Inspection, a state institution, came forward and okayed the certificate for them. State Forests rarely disclose their client list so it is tricky to know where to direct criticism.

JS: What is the current situation in the Camp? You mentioned there are fewer people now than

6 Some months later, timber from the Bialowieza Forest also lost the PEFC certification (editor's note)

in summer. Does anyone outside the camp work with you? What are your priorities now?

JR: Legal matters are the biggest burden. We stipulated in the Camp rules that if you come there and decide do participate in the protests, you will defend everyone who contributed to its creation and functioning, as we follow the principle of solidarity. There are now over 100 people who have court cases, a matter which requires coordination. The legal fees need to be paid. Communication needs a lot of work too.

Another thing is the patrols, which are ongoing. For the moment, things seem peaceful as far as logging is concerned and nothing too dramatic is going on; it remains to be seen for how long.

We also intend to prepare a report summarizing the entire 2017, as the Białowieża Forest had not had a worse year for a long time. We have collected a lot of materials which we would like to present in such a way that it is accessible to as wide a public as possible. It is a massive task and we would like to finish it by the time European Court of Justice gives its verdict.[7]

We are also working on educational programs incentivizing local participation, which we mentioned earlier. We have recently sent out the offer to various educational institutions to run free nature-sensitizing workshops with a variety of approaches, for instance, the above-mentioned improvisation, forest walks, etc. This way we want to start establishing ties with the local community and change the view on what the basis of the regional economy is, instilled by the forestry and lumber industrial complex.

JS: Is this educational offer directed towards schools?

JP: Schools, as well as community centers. We also started working with a orphanage in Białowieża, so we are committed to local action.

Periodically we organize events which came to be called "Weekend for the Forest". These meetings are held all over Poland and focus on the Forest. We not only discuss the Camp but also conservation topics and ways of working for

7 In April 2018 ECJ ruled that increased logging in the Białowieża Forest was in breach of EU law (editor's note).

the Forest. It is vital to consistently do this kind of activities. The meetings are organized once a month.

JS: What do you see as the biggest achievement of the Camp?

JP: It would definitely be putting a stop to logging, which would not have happened without publicizing it in the media, not only in Poland. There were times when nobody in Poland felt like writing about it anymore but foreign journalists kept coming, from Japan to Costa Rica. Lots of TV crews came over and made reports. We helped them with that, showing logging sites and sharing information we got hold of. The media campaign is ongoing.

JS: What I see as another achievement of the protests in the Białowieża Forest was a Government reshuffle. Do you think that removing Minister Jan Szyszko and Mr. Tomaszewski, the Director of State Forests, points to a major shift in the Government's environmental policy?

JP: I see them as cosmetic changes, without any strategic importance. There are no new people with a mindset different to that of Mr. Szyszko or Mr. Tomaszewski. I think the new Director of State Forests, Andrzej Konieczny is even cleverer than Tomaszewski. The attitude stays the same. A few days ago the news broke that someone from State Forests wants to fell trees in the Białowieża Forest's protected areas, citing "security reasons". Again, they say that only roadside trees will be felled, also to create new access roads in the Forest, in such reserves as Wysokie Bagno, which is a beautiful and unspoiled area of the Forest. Together with the Coalition, we organized a petition and publicized the matter in the media, trying to get into the session of the Regional Council for Nature Conservation where this idea was to be debated. Obviously, we were denied access but we went to Bialystok and in the end it made a difference—the media showed up and we collected 2000 signatures on the petition. Ultimately, the person behind this idea decided to pull it. They also insinuated that we got it all wrong because the project concerned trees posing some danger, i.e. the ones which grow in such a way that they cannot be felled safely. I mean, come on! (laughs)

Professor Rafał Kowalczyk, the director of the Mammal Research Institute in the Polish Academy of Sciences, immediately asked if they wanted to build roads going through strict reserves. Other scientists also protested. The surprising thing was that the proposers withdrew the project even before it was put to a vote.

The threats are still there. It does not matter if it is Jan Szyszko or his successor Henryk Kowalczyk. They keep coming up with more brilliant ideas on how to hide the logging behind security reasons or improving tourist mobility. You cannot take your eye off the Bulletin of Public Information even for a second, because these ideas keep cropping up and coming back. Now, for example, a road is being concreted over, which should not be. Animals will die there. That is why we are starting new patrols to monitor the number of animals killed in the Białowieża Forest area.

JR: The halt to logging does not indicate a constant positive trend. It is a temporary decision motivated by short-term reasons. For one thing, ECJ will deliver its verdict soon, so Poland does not want to stick its neck out. For another, forest districts work according to ten-year plans which stipulate the maximum amount of timber to extract. In theory, these quotas should last them till 2021—a full four years—but because of the drastic increase in logging last year, the y have already been reached. Now they are waiting for annexes to these plans to extend the limits. The whole affair which ended up in ECJ, started precisely with such an annex for the Białowieża Forest district. The two other districts are waiting for their respective annexes and it does not seem like the new Minister will have any objections to them; that is why I do not expect things to change course. More like a change in rhetoric. For Szyszko, ecologists are demons and Satanists; for Kowalczyk—mere freaks. Unfortunately, their attitude is essentially the same.

Translated by Artur Kociałkowski

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORG BLOKUS
CONCRETENESS OF HOPE

JAN SOWA: Most of the people who have been creating the School of Political Hope have had some experience of working within established cultural institutions in the past. Why do you feel the need to do something on your own? Why not act within the institutions where you have already been? These have been public institutions, not commercial galleries limited by the material interests of the owner. Why do you want to self-organize?

GEORG BLOKUS: Even if we are still young, most of us were fed up. On the one hand, it is based on experiences with widespread precarity concerning working conditions in public institutions of arts and culture. You have this situation in Germany and other places around the art world, where those institutions are not paying you sufficiently for the job you are doing, or are hiring you as a flexible and digital freelancer, while operating within organizational structures that are still from the 20th century. You can see that there is an inner contradiction in these institutions. For example, they promote progressive arts and politics, while simultaneously having a very old-school power structure. It is the structure that determines how people work and act together in those institutions, how in those very precarious situations are they taking care of each other. I experienced situations where, as long as you are making yourself available for any kind of task that needs to be done, then everything is fine, but when someone is sick, burned out or simply not able to work as hard as before, then it starts getting really shitty. If we want a generous and caring society, we need generous and caring institutions. If we don't have them today, we will have to create them for the future. It's not done to be critical towards politicians and large corporations, we also have to think about new organizing models in our own sphere.

On the other hand, of course, we need public institutions now even more than ever, and we need to defend them. Look at the case of the Volksbühne in Berlin, which changed into this

neoliberal Chris Dercon style institution—and luckily failed. Theaters are increasingly becoming future laboratories for neoliberal creative cities. German theaters are very willing to assume this role. But what will a public institution be when neoliberalism finally disappears? I believe that public institutions are able to promote political change only up to a certain point. They are still part of the system and they have all those strings attached. If arts and culture workers really want to instill political change—which I honestly do not believe in all those who pretend to do so—they also have to think more in a self-organized, genuinely political way. A way where the political aspect is prioritized over promoting your own career, for example. That was a very important issue in the School, at the beginning. We had this dogma from the beginning, where some of us said: "If there is anybody, who wants to be part of this project just to put it on their CV, please leave." This is not the primary reason why we do what we want to do in a long-term perspective.

JS: What do you think is the reason behind these limitations of how far political change can be brought by public institutions? Is it a problem of self-censorship, censorship imposed from the outside, or control from the founding body? Or is it maybe a question of the structure of public institutions?

GB: Those structural, organizational and financial concerns are all very important, but one very important aspect, for me, is the aesthetic dimension of what public institutions are producing. Let's say you are part of the public, and you come to a political talk in a theater, then people go out and discuss it after the talk, but there is a huge feeling of frustration, because those public institutions create a consumerist situation pretending to be a productive political discourse. Don't let me be misunderstood, there's nothing bad about talks and panels. But as people are now again having an honest willingness to get engaged in discourse or in certain kinds of action, they very often feel the inability of those institutions to provide it. L'art-pour-l'art is over now. Only in rare cases do they give you a possibility to self-organize, or to have some kind of a reflection-action mode, as we call it after Paulo Freire. What comes after the talk? What comes after the discussion? What comes next? What are the steps that need to be taken? And *how* is it to be done, to paraphrase Lenin.

JAN
SOWA

JS: You mean that it's not a form of life in terms of co-existence and doing things together? More of a client-server relation: you are coming to get some content and then you go out, is this what you mean? Because when you say "aesthetic", do you mean "artistic" or rather "aesthetic" in terms of the Kantian aesthetic of time and space?

GB: I mean "aesthetic" in the sense that Jacques Rancière uses this concept: what kind of temporal and spatial reality are you experiencing in the case of those events? In Germany, for example, there has long been a never-ending debate on audience development. It's a neoliberal policy that impacts arts and cultural institutions very strongly. They have to legitimize themselves, so we are doing projects that go into the social daily lives of people, but at the same time we are trying to bring those people into institutions. For example, cultural institutions go to the communities and carry out some kind of more or less highly elaborated participatory short-term project.

But on the other hand, there is often a lack of relevance, for example, concerning the working class people, migrants, or refugees. Do those talks, discussions and projects really matter to them, and do they care about their life conditions, struggles, and hopes, or do they—in the worst case—merely want to sell high-culture to lower-class people? If those people do not enter the theater, in most cases it is because they are simply not attracted by the space created by those public institutions and their white, upper-class audiences. Especially because they do not believe in their benefit for personal, social, and political change. For example, my parents, who are Polish working class migrants living in the suburbs of Cologne, would not enter a theater if I did not take them with me. They simply do not have any trust in those spaces; they feel excluded because they do not feel sufficiently educated or cultivated; they probably unconsciously even feel self-contempt in the mirror of the theater stage.

This leads to an alarmingly high number of people in Germany that do not come into contact with cultural institutions at all. For example, in Germany only around 10 per cent of the population go to theaters. If theaters were spaces where this socio-economic-political dissensus would be represented and people

would understand their lives through stories, images, and performances, I am sure my parents would be more likely to go there. Because it would change their lives. And this is what art and culture in its essence is all about.

JS: I agree it is frustrating, because we are talking over and over to the same people. The same in terms of class position, lifestyle, taste etc. It is basically an eternal repetition. What can we do within public institutions to overcome this kind of limitation?

GB: There has been some very obscene liberal talk since Trump, and even before, about getting out of our "bubbles". It is closely connected to the debate about participation in cultural institutions: how we can make different people come to us, listen to us, learn about theory, see art, and so on ... and become like *us*. There is an ideological presumption behind that, whereby outside our communities there are people who do not know who they are and that they are really in a total mess. It says that *they* need to be enlightened, that they need to be officially politically educated in what democracy is, etc. That is the illusion most liberals cultivate in their inner circles. So it is little wonder that liberals are so willing to engage in talks with right-wing extremists and fascists, however meaningless and even dangerous this may be. But I don't see a lot of voices that would emphasize the need to listen to radical left-wingers or refugees, for example, to those who are protecting people's lives and really caring about our common future. So real progressives should first see, then listen, then join common struggles, and last but not least open their cultural doors and educational spaces for those who don't know that they could also belong to them, to their interests, and their needs.

JS: And that you should give them tools, so they can develop their knowledge...

GB: Exactly. We also had this debate early on in the School of Political Hope. "What are we doing? We have to break up those "bubbles". We must bring those people here and let them tell their stories, their realities and their political concerns." But only in the public discussion after a talk, for example. Then we thought: what is the situation that we are really creating? There is some kind of patronizing position among these people on the stage when they are speaking to working-class people or refugees.

At that moment we really addressed one point: let's be honest, we—who are organizing this initiative—we are young, urban and cosmopolitan hipsters. We may be more or less engaged in the communities of working-class people or refugee background, but most of the people that will be coming to our events will be like us. There is this kind of arrogant elephant in the room that is never addressed. I have never seen it addressed in any public cultural institution: who are we to know what to do politically, if we are not even able to change our own life conditions, or even worse, the working conditions in our theaters and museums? So perhaps we should let them talk, on stage. And at a certain point we will also know what they need, what we should provide and how we can learn new things together. This changes everything, the aesthetics and the politics, because when we rearrange the space we are in, we rearrange the social and political relations we experience.

JS: Why do you think it is nevertheless so important to break out of the art "bubble"? After all, art institutions are about art ...

GB: It creates a different kind of experience for the liberal elites of the art world, when you really practice the "equality of intelligences", as Rancière calls it. For our first event, we invited twelve speakers from very different backgrounds: students, political entrepreneurs, activists, philosophers, theater directors, publishers, workers, and refugees. This mostly liberal public also the people who were teaching them how to survive in these times. Refugees brought their friends, and there were refugees in the audience. It was an astonishing experience that this worked, but even so we could not properly answer their question as to why they were there. But, okay, it was the first event ... (laugh). At least there was a space created without the patronizing attitude that we very often find in art institutions: everybody was equal in our ignorance of not knowing what to do politically, and at the same time feeling powerless. I think this is a very important lesson for liberals and academic elites.

However, we quickly hit another wall—we are an independent organization that has mostly no funding, but people were not giving donations after the events. There were 200 people at the first event and we gathered around 100 euro. I thought: "Oh fuck! Those hipsters want us to do something politically im-

portant, but who is going to pay for it?" When you introduce tickets, you alienate people who cannot afford it. So now we developed a strategy whereby we have some kind of word of mouth invitation cards that we give to people who cannot afford the ticket or would not attend such events. For example, when I take a taxi and I have an interesting conversation with the driver, I give him a personal invitation to come to our event for free. But the art-crowd hipsters will have to pay for all of us (laugh).

JS: Have you ever thought about trying to influence a public institution to make it work in in a different mode? Technically, the term "public" in "public institution" means it belongs to everyone. That's how it's supposed to work. Why do we still need to struggle, even with the public institutions? Public institutions in a democratic state are our institutions. They are supervised by elected officials. Why is it not working? Maybe we can do something with it?

GB: Let's try again, fail again and fail better, to quote Samuel Beckett. I tried especially in the Academy of Arts of the World in Cologne, where we had an initiative called Youth Academy. When I directed it, I wanted to make this a self-organized project and I had the support of my superiors. But there is some kind of contradiction in public institutions. They are initiated by the state or the cities, but unfortunately people do not really have any fixed concept of what 'public' or 'common' means in this context. They go there and they wonder what they can get from this institution in terms of its "mission". I had the concept of how we could do it, to really make it a self-organized space, but then a discussion started: "Oh ... What about the quality of art?" This is always the discussion in the end at cultural institutions. Or: "Yeah ... But let's not let them work too free. It should look a bit like an art institution." You have these and other constraints that are inherent in all public institutions; 50 per cent of what you are doing is just reproducing the institution. You are always in this contradiction: how to develop an aesthetical and political practice with people, and on the other side to keep "the business" running.

JS: Accounting departments rule the world (laugh).

GB: Documentation, evaluation and so on, this is the core of capi-

talism as it actually exists. It is the peak of this absurdity. When I worked for the Academy of Arts of the World, one day I had to make an Excel spreadsheet with names of everyone involved in the project, containing their age, academic credentials and especially their ethnic and social background. It was needed only to persuade the board that the program was successful. This is what self-organization means very often in public institutions nowadays: "Show me that there are some migrants ..." And there are even projects where they have all those white upper-class kids and somebody starts saying: "We should be more diverse." (laugh). But unfortunately there're only a few who will bring those people to their projects, open the doors and share their resources and privileges.

J S: This is not any kind of political inclusion, but a neoliberal management of diversity. Are there any examples of public institutions that actually work in a progressive way?

G B: Yes, some. Let me give you one of the most beautiful examples for me. In 2017, from May 17 to 21, in Schauspiel Köln, the public theatre of Cologne, the "Tribunal Unraveling the NSU Complex" (Tribunal NSU-Komplex auflösen) took place, next to the "Keupstraße", which is one of the Turkish shopping streets in Cologne attacked by a bomb of the NSU terrorists. It was an initiative by activists, theorists, artists, and survivors of the largest Nazi terror attack series after World War II in Germany by the so-called NSU (Nationalsozialistisches Untergrund). As the state did not provide any "complete explanation", despite Chancellor Merkel promising it, people took their own lives into their hands and organized a symbolic tribunal from the bottom-up, in order to indict institutional and everyday racism in Germany, which became evident around the NSU Complex of Nazi terror, racism and state institutions. The past and present racist history of Germany was explored publicly during four days of workshops, theater performances, video installations and a final indictment; a post-migrant vision of a future society of the many manifested itself. I was there in the audience for most of the time, and I still remember it as a very strong and moving experience, seeing people who are normally not allowed to speak about their political suffering in public using the theater stage as a medium of collective empowerment and solidarity. The whole

tribunal was also co-organized by the Academy of the Arts of the World/Cologne.

I think that is a very important strategy for self-organizing. If there are institutions that want to promote your actions, ask them for their resources, their space and then do the things that you have decided on. You do these things in a place where you may have some political concerns, but you will not be controlled by their agenda.

JS: So it is sort of a hybrid public/common enterprise, in terms of a public institution providing the necessary organizational infrastructure. But then you are still a self-organizing group that is filling that with content.

GB: Exactly. And with action!

JS: Do you know how it happened? Whose idea it was? Who initiated that cooperation? I find it very difficult for a public institution to engage in a self-organized project from the very beginning. This is a sort of contradiction: you have to organize self-organization.

GB: This particular self-organized initiative was really self-organized. It came out of certain political and social problems. All those people were living in Germany, a Germany that still is full of racism and violence against migrants. It was a symbolic act of a future society emancipating itself from state authorities that do not care sufficiently about these issues, or are even accomplices of this permanent racist violence.

On the one hand, there were survivors, families of those killed, along with ordinary people from all over the country who were organizing their traumatized communities after the attacks. Not least because no one believed them. On the other hand, there were a lot of activists, artists and theorists like Nanna Heidenreich, Massimo Perinelli, Peter Scheiffele, Aurora Rodonò, and Ulf Aminde, who were also the door-openers to the public institutions. And finally there was a network of supporting and funding institutions like Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin, HAU Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, Kammerspiele München, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Amadeu Antonio Foundation, and Forensic Architecture Institute London. They opened their doors and pockets to this initiative making their infrastructure and resources available.

JS: Can you elaborate upon the concept of "post-migrant" that you mentioned? What does it mean in the context of cultural production?

GB: In the context of the German debate, it was about five years ago when it finally became crystal clear that there is a huge problem with structural racism in German theaters and cultural institutions: if you are a Turkish actor, you will play the role of a Turkish criminal, or something which has to do with your ethnic background. If you're a black guy, you will be limited to certain "black" roles. The same thing happens with directors, producers and cultural workers… This was the context when the concept of post-migration was introduced in Germany, which has since then become more and more important. Despite the fact that we are living in the third or fourth generation of post-Gastarbeiterbewegung in Germany, the structures of representation of migrants in public institutions are really bad. They are simply not represented. Then Ballhaus Naunynstraße theatre and Shermin Langhoff started this post-migrant theatre. They started to have the first theatre ensemble consisting only of migrants, which started a revolution.

JS: OK, so it is a way of integrating migrants but, to use Rancière's conceptual framework again, not in a policed way, where a Turkish person plays a Turk, a black person plays a black character and everybody has their place, yes?

GB: Exactly! You just let everybody move and assume different identities within this post-migrant institution. And since 2013, Shermin Langhoff has been the Artistic Director of the famous Maxim Gorki Theater and is shifting the identity of German "Stadttheater".

JS: Let's go back to your own practice—the School of Political Hope. Can you sketch a little bit the story behind how it was created? What was the thing that finally tipped the balance for you?

GB: Personally for me, the breaking point was the day after the election of Trump. I realized that I had no really politically organized project at that moment. I felt like: "Oh fuck!" As I knew

the situation in Cologne, I knew that there were not many people in the arts and culture scene I could join. There are leftist radicals, but they are occupied by their own struggles for autonomous structures. There are some liberals doing some discussion rounds, but there was no real connection between arts and culture and activism.

Then a friend of mine put together some kind of salon after the election of Trump. There were thirty people invited, but in the end it was just me and him. It was a really sad evening. We were drinking tea, nothing really happened. We were just talking and analyzing. Then I asked, if we should do some kind of a project that would focus on unlearning this hopeless situation that we were in, while at the same time, relearning to produce some common hope. We were talking about a kind of alternative school week-program in one of those empty buildings that had formerly been schools for students with special needs. While brainstorming this idea, my Trump-post-election despair disappeared at least for a few moments. I believe in the position advocated by bell hooks, that any radical political change needs a dimension of hope against despair and disillusionment. You must have a vision that can be followed.

Then I created a private Facebook event and invited a hundred to the *Erfindung Europa* (Reinvent Europe) congress in Frankfurt. I invited these hundred people who I didn't know very well. Some of them were my friends, but most of them did not know each other. I asked them to come on this weekend to Frankfurt together. Then about twenty people decided to join and booked their train tickets. We also arranged an Airbnb apartment together, but it turned out to be fake and we lost 800 euro. You have to pay a price for political engagement (laugh).

J
S: And what happened in Frankfurt?

G
B: This was some kind of a situation where people were mostly unknown to each other, but they felt very engaged and inspired to do something together. Adrian Zandberg was there, as well as Ulrike Guérot, Srećko Horvat and some other people. Then, after this weekend, we started to meet and to think about what kind of concept this could be. What are the problems? We had the "bubble" discussion that I mentioned before, and how could we solve it. How can we create an egalitarian educational space?

How can we not fall into the trap of repeating the mistakes of public institutions, but rather be ourselves in this struggle?

It took another half a year until our first event, all the time thinking and rethinking this concept. In particular, we visited many positive events where we expected to find different formats and different situations of interaction. We wanted to see some examples, because we didn't know how to do it. We had some theoretical background, basically in terms of what problems we would be facing. But we had no real answers to those problems. And we are still searching for those answers. This is very much a work in progress and on progress. How should these situations be created, so that people can get into some kind of collective self-organizing process?

J
S: I understand, from what you have said about public institutions, that you do not want to attract onlookers, passive bystanders, people who just show up and are there, but rather active participants.

G
B: Yes, we tried to treat those visitors or participants as social agents. I don't know if this is a perfect translation, in German we say "gesellschaftliche Akteure". We as artists and cultural producers are creating those situations or arrangements in which people come together. For me personally, the project is a mixture between art, education, and activism. Do you know what Beuys said? "The teacher is the one who speaks." It might be that in one moment I am the teacher or the organizer of the situation, but later on I might also be a student, a social agent, a political agent who is taking on a different role in the process. It is some kind of a dogma for us, to fight for ourselves and to get involved in others' struggles.

J
S: Can you give an example of that engagement?

G
B: There was a situation with Foodora, a platform-capitalist food delivery service. I met them in the center of Cologne and I asked them: "Hey guys, I have read that there are people in your company who are founding a workers' union. I would like to meet them." I was lucky because they were the workers that were founding it (laugh). Half a year earlier, I had been struggling along with my parents, who were launching a workers' union in their own company. This was very interesting, because at that

moment I was concerned about my parents, who were really affected, both physically and mentally, by the conditions they were working in. For a certain time, I became some kind of organizer for my parents, and later also for those Foodora workers. They use me now if they need my help. They tell me that they need an article in the media and ask if I know any journalists who could write about their problems. There, I am a supplier of contacts. Then some of them started a social media campaign called "Liefern am Limit", where they have a national outreach. I'm quite sure that they will bring up hope and change in the struggle against platform capitalists. When I'm talking to them, I am able to learn from them because they are really good at what they are doing. They have an enthusiasm that is so often missing.

I believe this could be a really interesting role for public institutions: transformative community organization, knowledge collection and building bridges between those who have the knowledge and those who need it. From theorists, to activists, to artists, to ordinary people, all organized in a workers' union, in feminist or antiracist groups.

J S: There is an obvious question, but also one that is absolutely fundamental from a materialistic point of view: How do you fund your action? Not being an NGO means not having access to grants. You mentioned targeted ticketing of some segments of those who show up. What else do you do?

G B: Not being an NGO cuts you off of many sources of funds, but it also gives you independence. In the best case, everybody is dreaming of some kind of Bernie Sanders fundraising campaign with small donations of 27 dollars. A campaign where everyone is giving because they feel concerned and you remain independent from private and public funds, you do not have to fill out those applications that take so much time.

We wanted to receive donations and, as I said before, you have a situation when you are asking people for donations, but not really getting any. In Germany, it is normal to pay 8 euro if you want to go to the movies. If you want popcorn and a cola you will pay 15 euro. So we had the impression that giving 5 euros or 3 euros at least would be OK for people from our class who come to an event like this. But it is apparently not the casae.

JAN
SOWA

We are also thinking about crowdfunding certain projects which are much more community- or action-oriented.

For example, we are now planning monthly salon sessions on "Weltschmerz" in the tradition of Mark Fisher. He was a British cultural theorist who unfortunately killed himself last year. He wrote a book called *Capitalist Realism*. It is a very important critical reflection in which he writes about depression as a political-economic condition that combines all different categories of people. In particular women, care workers, migrants, but also liberals working in precarious conditions. We want to carry out a project with monthly salons where we would discuss how to speak about suffering and political injustice, and how those personal experiences are connected to the political conditions we are living in. We want to produce a podcast with invited guest speakers and all those people there. We imagine that for projects like this it is possible to do something like crowdfunding. It is very focused and people know what it is and can get engaged in it. But for our whole initiative, crowdfunding makes no sense, because we know that we are not living in the US where this is far more easily possible. In Germany and in other European countries, where there is still public funding policy for culture and art, there is no chance that people will be willing to pay an amount sufficient to run whole institutions. So we are also considering whether to officially become an NGO.

J
S: Have you tried crowdfunding via websites like Kickstarter?

G
B: Not yet. But, you know, the most important thing for us are the spaces we get. I think that in most art projects, the space where you can meet, produce and rehearse is the first thing that you need. We get such spaces for free: churches, theatres and other places. In the self-organized way, for a crowdfunding campaign to be successful, you need to already be successful. You already have to have some kind of community that is filling the project with energy, and is also willing to pay for it. Unfortunately, we are not at the point yet, where we would have this vivid community that could make it go viral.

J
S: How do you take decisions about what to do? What's your deliberation process? Do you use any

tools—online or offline—to facilitate discussions and decision making?

G B: We have a kind of a procedure that has not been highly evolved yet. For example, now we are talking about the program for the next year. What should the topic be? There is a guy who is part of the *Association for the Design of History* in Düsseldorf. They are working on Fukuyama—or rather against him—but they are also supporting striking care workers in hospitals. He came to us and said that he likes what we are doing and, as we are making an open call to progressives, he would like to make an impact and has a proposal for us. He suggested that we should dedicate next year to the issue of care revolution, some kind of vision of a caring society. And we will do it, in various ways. It was always a priority to take those impulses from the people who join our School.

Concerning collaboration and decision making, we use a range of online tools, because communication with more than ten people via email just doesn't work. I won't do it anymore (laugh).

J S: I agree it's horrible. If you ever take a break from reading theses emails for just a day or two, you have so many messages piling up that it becomes overwhelming.

G B: To be honest, I don't know why mailing lists still exist. There has been so much progress in communication technology. Why does this bullshit still exist? Or maybe it is just me who hates it (laugh).

J S: So what online tools are you using?

G B: The tool we use is especially "Trello". It is free and very user-friendly. It offers project management, collaboration on different boards for different topics etc. It has a calendar, personal assignments, tasks, due dates, etc. Since we started using it, everything is easier and much more transparent. You can see the workflow, how things are going. Responsibility often becomes diffused in self-organized groups, leaving things that nobody ends up taking care of. This tool helps everybody to be in a productive flow together.

Of course, you need someone to coordinate all those processes and take all existing personal resources into account. At

the same time, you need people who can moderate meetings and prevent never-ending discussions. But it is also necessary that you know how to bring up creativity and meaningful communication in a group. And this is just one way we embrace the possibilities of digital technologies. A new tool we are using is, for example, "RealtimeBoard" which offers you different templates for creative discussions, analyses and decision making.

J S: Apart from communication and fundraising, what are the biggest challenges for your initiative?

G B: What causes huge problems is rotation among the members of our group. It is very frustrating. There is someone who gets very heavily engaged in planning and argues strongly in favor of some idea. Then, after two months, they leave for some reason and we have to deal with the legacy of their engagement. Then you have some kind of conflict between individual concerns and organizational continuity. This is very frustrating and makes me really scared. How can we get to the point where we have some kind of structure that is provided and sustained by some people, but at the same time is not totally dependent on those people?

For example, as I was making most of the concept, proposals and contacts with guests, I realized that, given my workload, I could not continue like this because I would not have enough money by the end of the month. The project was too dependent on one person, me in this case. More people should have gotten involved, but then their work would have to be organized and coordinated. I have learnt from my friends in workers' unions that they have the same problem. They do not know how to organize all their work. That's why we, the leftists, should definitely think more about organizational theory and practice, and not let it be the responsibility of McKinsey and Boston Consulting. These are very unsexy issues, like Excel spreadsheets for instance. I can find enjoyment in them, I do it for relaxation sometimes (laugh), but I know that there are people who hate it. In left wing and self-organized projects, there are many people who have some kind of conceptual ideas. They are more or less good, but at the same time, there are very few people, who want to organize the common work and to think about how the group should function. This infrastructural part is highly underestimated. Most of the projects do not fail because of conceptual problems; they fail because of infrastructural and organizational problems.

This is especially crucial, because at the same time you have big claims for non-hierarchical power structures in the tradition of many left-wing movements of the past. I still don't know which way we should go. On the one hand, in our case we know how important collective work is. On the other hand, we should not simply follow the left-wing business-as-usual approach, if it doesn't function. To be honest, I believe in what the US feminist, political scientist and lawyer Jo Freeman wrote in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* in 1971: "To strive for a structureless group is as useful, and as deceptive, as aiming at an "objective" news story, "value-free" social science, or a "free" economy." But we are longing for new meaningful and powerful self-organizing approaches like, for example, those being used by progressive grassroots organizations around the Bernie Sanders movement in the tradition of Community Organizing by Saul Alinsky, or newer approaches like the Public Narrative work developed by Harvard professor, civil rights movement organizer and Obama 2008 volunteer campaign designer Marshall Ganz. All those approaches try to answer the questions of how to engage people in meaningful and effective political change, how to build relationships and trust, how to structure groups, how to develop powerful and efficient strategies, and how to create actions that use the existing resources of the people involved in a way that they can get the power to make real political change. And how can we develop learning organizations that not only counter structural problems, but also promote personal and collective emancipation by the development of leadership and organizational skills, so everyone can take responsibility that is really distributed and shared.

We, for example, have a collective meeting once a week. We learned very quickly that without regular meetings there is no continuity. Then we have some kind of responsibilities—I take care of the artistic direction and the guests; Corinna Ujkasevic takes care of political networking and organizing, and Anna-Mareen Henke is responsible for project coordination, partners, and finance. She coordinates everything, because when there are seven people doing something, you need one person to watch over everything. There is more of this concrete event or project organization part, technical part and communications. Mostly we have the same responsibilities as other institutions. We don't have time to let everybody do everything. It is simply not effi-

cient. Even though I hate task rotation, because I believe that everybody should do what he or she is best in, we are trying to develop a learning culture so that, for example, everybody also has to learn something new in a project.

JS: What kind of conflict situations have you had so far? I mean moments when something was really on the edge. My experience is that, as long as there is enthusiasm and a common vision, everything goes well and we naturally, spontaneously communicate. We do not really need framework or procedures. We need them when all those things break down. What do you do then?

GB: In the concept of the School, from the beginning, it was inherent that we wanted to have some efficacy, political efficacy and political concreteness. In various forms of what we promote and what we try to engage in, we want to be engaged in concrete problems. At the same time, it was obvious that in the first period we did not manage to do this. There was some glimpse of where it could lead. A couple of our meetings introduced some political theory and people were saying that it was cool because we tried out new "younger" formats. They were interested in theory and they were suggesting people from other cities that could join. At the same time, there was an impression that we did not reach what was our goal of efficacy. My personal position was that we should be patient and follow the line that we had taken. On the other hand, some had a feeling that we should have become a better defined activist group and go on the streets. I think that it is a universal experience of every group and politically engaged initiative in the cultural field. There is always a debate as to whether we are focused enough.

JS: By directly engaged, you mean taking part in specific struggles, not just talking about various problems, yes?

GB: Exactly. It was more of a discursive problem. There was one guy who wanted to go more in this direction of specific actions. I think that there was no contradiction there, because all the others said that they wanted to do it, but they stressed that we were not a workers' union and we were not anarchists organizing a bakery. We wanted to be an institution that is not organiz-

ing events, but organizing people from various struggles around a common vision. It led to a situation where he wanted to leave the group because he was only ready to invest his resources in a project that would have a certain outcome for him. We told him that we saw his point and that we had to be much more effective in what we were doing. We came together because of this specific reason of creating a self-organized political and educational space and growing political self-confidence and building up collective action capacities. Then things got really shitty, because there were numerous two-person debates on many levels. Everybody was speaking with each other and there was no collective discussion of how to solve this problem and how to get along. In the end that guy left.

Personally, I think that it is very important to acknowledge from the very beginning what people's values, beliefs and priorities are, especially the aspect of free time. This is something we did not clarify at the beginning. How much time do you have? That is also a problem faced by my parents' workers' union and others. How much time can you give to the common cause? In a workers' union it is easier, because it is defined by the law that you have two hours of your paid labor time per week to engage in union work. However, in the situation like ours, when we are not in a workplace, you have to be very honest and very clear about how much engagement you can really bear. And what your expectations in terms of outcome are.

I believe that if someone is not able to follow a strategy or a goal because of lack of time or other resources, it is better to let that person leave than to impose too many constraints within the project.

JS: You framed your talk in Warsaw in the slogan: "From participatory art to organizational art". Could you elaborate a little bit on that and maybe put the School of Political Hope in this context?

GB: It all began with Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*, where she diagnosed a shift in the art world. A social turn to projects, where artists are more socially engaged in the spirit of historical avant-garde and community arts in the 1970s; artists want to do more than art, to intervene in the field of social relations. At the same time, she sees that all those projects, in their focus on collaboration, cooperation and collectivity, are perceived in the art

world only in their ethical dimension. They ask whether this or that project is morally good. It is good because people are communicating and they are eating lunch together; it's nice. But the aesthetic dimension of this participatory art was far in the background. Nobody was thinking about it.

This was also my experience in the many participatory projects that I took part in or organized myself. Often I did not personally even feel the right to critique a participatory art work, because most of those projects were hiding behind the curtain of "moral correctness" without really emphasizing its aesthetical dimension or political consequences. I was more thinking about whether people were feeling well in this situation, rather than if anything was coming out of it. Was it some kind of artistic experience, in terms of provocation or disruption or even transformation? Or did people just not want to disturb the art work?

I took part in a congress in Berlin, organized by Jonas Staal—Artists Organizations International—in January 2015, where artistic organizations from all over the world came together. There were Kurdish artists, the Center for Political Beauty from Germany, Milo Rau's International Institute of Political Murder and many, many others. It was a very inspiring three days. Later on, I realized that I was increasingly bored by these projects that deny the economic dimension of our reality. There were many interesting projects on gender, on race and so on, but no economic aspect of it.

JS: I totally see your point—any critique of political economy has almost completely vanished in the times of identity politics.

GB: This was also what Milo Rau was addressing at the AOI. At a certain point he had realized that, in a place where he was supposed to meet all those progressive people, he was surrounded by a shitload of liberals who were doing their own feel-good projects. Then I read about projects like Jonas Staal's New World Summit, saw more Milo Rau works and I realized that there was something new going on, I hadn't known about so far. There were people going in a much more *politically* and not only socially engaged direction. They were concerned with issues that I had never heard of in projects that I had seen. I realized more and more, a feeling that I could not exactly name in the years before, that I needed to reflect more on the political presump-

tions and consequences my own practice, even if it seems morally correct what we are doing. Artists will be filling the institutional and organizational gaps that neoliberalism created in the dimension of social care. So you can make people laugh, you can make them eat, you can make them cry...

JS: ... you can give them shelter.

GB: Yes, but making a charity project is not the path towards making a permanent, structural, political change. People can permanently help each other only when they take their own conditions seriously, take back responsibility over their lives and organize with others in a long-term struggle, because they cannot help themselves, we need others. And we need spaces where this experience of commonality is possible. This is what I mean by becoming more political: to concretely build up institutions and organizations for the future. Those fictions will become reality one day. But not by pure magic.

JS: Not artificial institutions, but the real ones?

GB: Exactly. I think that this is very hopeful in this organizational turn in the arts. There is some kind of distinct about organizing and organizations that is missing. Imagine three, four or five years from now, when the political infrastructure will probably grow even worse. One thing that we definitely can do is to build parallel new infrastructure. Infrastructure of institutions and organizations able to furnish the representation of the common. We need schools and new visions for political education or political self-education. We need tribunals like the "Tribunal Unraveling the NSU Complex" and on the global scale, as Milo Rau does it, which would make finance capitalists and international corporations accountable. We do not have them, so let's create them. This is what I really like in this specificity of hope.

JS: Isn't it going back to the concept of social sculpture put forward by Joseph Beuys? He co-founded the Green Party as an act of political action, but it was also a gesture of aesthetic creation. A sculpture is always a certain object in front of you. The way I see it, what you are talking about is very much the same kind of sculpting in the social substance: creating an institution as a stable relation between people.

B: Beuys once said: "My most important artwork is my teaching." At the same time, Beuys is a very good example of this social turn that Claire Bishop was writing about. In the end, he joined a political party because his art was not able to create a new political aesthetic. In the end, when he wanted to get engaged in ethics, communication and togetherness, he had to go to a political party, accept the conditions and hope for more or less big reforms, the old *"Marsch durch die Institutionen"*.

I think this is exactly what these organizational arts are not doing. It is creating the conditions for a kind of new political system of coordinates within the system of art as such. That system of art itself is able to sustain more than simply a communicative or contemplative experience—it is also able to create focused political imagination, in terms of institutions, organizations and actions. In organizational arts we organize people so they build up new institutions in an imaginary aesthetic space without constraints, which finally become reality in the political space, some years, decades, or centuries down the road. Those imaginary actions create the hope we need to believe in a common future.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MONIKA PŁATEK
WHAT IS JUST?

JAN SOWA: I am under the impression that we are seeing a mass mobilization to tighten up regulations; an ever-growing rigidity and various forms of oppression. Ziobro's [Minister of Justice of the Republic of Poland—translator's note] ideas are well-known and broadly discussed—changing the rules for the absorption of less severe punishments by more severe ones, and making them harsher wherever possible. I call it a mass mobilization because the current government is not the only political group undertaking such actions. There is the case of the very controversial law on dealing with mentally disturbed persons who endanger the life, health or sexual freedom of others passed by the Civic Platform. Before that, Donald Tusk wanted to enact ACTA, a law intended to increase internet surveillance and introduce penalties for new offences. As a criminal law expert who deals with such matters, what is your take on this situation? Where does it come from? What purpose does it serve?

MONIKA PŁATEK: We should situate it both systemically and temporally. In systemic terms, criminal law is present in every system, but not every system treats abuses of criminal law as one of the main tools to conduct daily state policy. Michael Cavadino and James Dignan created a model that describes the relation between the punitive nature of the criminal culture in a country and its socioeconomic system.[1] They divided such countries into several categories: neo-liberal—where the prime example is the US; conservative corporatist—France, Italy or the Netherlands; social democratic—Sweden or Finland; and oriental corporatist—whose model is Japan.

They did not include Poland in their analysis, but when one looks at the characteristics of each model, it is clear that Poland is closest to the neoliberal one. Cavadino and Dignan point to the small income inequality in a social democratic society, as opposed to the neoliberal system where it is high or very high. Poland—at least on paper—is included in the group of countries with a medium disparity between the rich and the less-affluent.

1 See M. Cavadino, J. Dignan, *Penal Systems. A Comparative Approach*, SAGE 2005 (editor's note).

In reality, that inequality is considerable. Countries such as Sweden or Finland foster a sense of community by implementing inclusive practices and avoiding exclusion. The US proudly declares: *America First*, but beneath the rhetoric they pursue a system of multi-level exclusion, both material and symbolic. Skin color, background, legal status and criminal record all divide people and translate into mad ideas of building walls. Exclusion and inclusion are related with the possibility of fulfilling life aspirations and climbing the ladder towards social strata identified as higher. Where exclusion and income disparity prevail, this progress is only easy in theory, whereas it is truly possible where equality is pursued. There, looking down on others and ostentation is a source of embarrassment and ridicule. In social democratic societies—as the name indicates—people with left-winged ideas come to power and remain there more easily; neoliberalism is a medium for the right. A neoliberal system gravitates towards the so-called "law and order"—seeking a solution through harsh criminal law to what is considered a problem, deviant behavior and evil. Showing it as crime legitimates exclusion and the deprivation of liberty. A prison becomes—as openly admitted in the United States at the end of the 20th century—a structural solution to the excess of workforce on the labor market. The idea of building prisons, including privately run ones, in order to lock people up for a long time as a solution to unemployment is pure evil. Yet, it was put into action in the US. It is no coincidence this happened most commonly in the former slave-owning states. Neoliberal countries have a tendency to "manufacture" criminals. Social welfare states see criminal law as the last resort in social control. This translates into an unwillingness to privatize the prison system and a reluctance to abuse criminal law. As a result, in such countries the prison population and average incarceration time are some of the lowest in the world. A sentence of three to six months imprisonment is considered long term. In our country, it would be thought of as short. There, prison time is imposed with a view to returning the prisoner to society. Here, the imprisoned simply get used to being in prison. There, punishment is seen as acquiring competence towards freedom. Here —as adapting to functioning in confinement.

Neoliberal systems have a tendency to abuse punishments consisting in long-term confinement. Such severing of ties with freedom naturally results in higher recidivism rates. Such sys-

tems also have a tendency to view prisons as businesses and a source of income. This is done at the expense of developing services outside this sector. We spend around 5 billion zlotys per year on the prison system, while the aim of prisons is to destroy people rather than help repair the harm done through the crime itself.

Cavadino and Dignan's analysis indicates that countries with fully-developed neoliberal systems, such as the US, the UK, New Zealand or Australia, are also those rooted in colonialism and slavery. Having read books written by you and Andrzej Leder,[2] we now know that, even though serfdom did not translate directly into slavery, as was present for instance in the US, we are a country that has inherited in its DNA, patterns of unequal treatment of people based on their social position and the binding of the peasant to the land, i.e. objectification and enslavement. Though indirectly, it corresponds to colonial patterns as well as those typical of states that practiced slavery, Ronald Inglehart has demonstrated that Poland resembles the US in terms of the outlook on family and world views.[3] I believe the experience of serfdom plays an important part here. It manifests in the day-to-day life in many people's attempts to prove their noble roots. It goes hand in hand with the cultural consent to look down on what is rural and treat what is peasant-like and rural badly. The countryside is associated with backwardness and ignorance, which is a good illustration of the process of passing the guilt onto the victims. It brings about and explains the tendencies to use criminal law to conduct the current penal policy. Instead of solving social problems, it is easier to unload guilt on those affected by the erroneous social policy and fooling people into thinking that severe punishments will solve the problem. This happens, for instance, with the criminalization of minor cannabis possession. I am not sure if possession and personal use of marijuana should be criminalized, I know that the criminalization of minor possession was introduced to pretend to solve the drug-use problem. It has led to many incarcerations, and still does. It is another specific example of accustoming society to the thought of excluding, locking up and throwing away the key, forgetting and neglecting those labeled as criminals, deviants or perverts. This happens parallel to overlooking the fact that this process facilitates or even trains exclusion, stigmatization, forgetting and neglect.

2 See J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla* [The King's Phantom Body], Universitas, Kraków 2012 and A. Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja* [Sleepwalking through Revolution], Krytyka Polityczna, Warszawa 2014 (editor's note).

3 See R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1977 (editor's note).

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So, this custom stems from our history and from the decades of Polish People's Republic when prisoners were cheap or free labor in the planned economy. It was a system where first a prison was built, then the prisoners built a factory and then they worked in it. This is comparable to the situation in the US. In both countries, the excluded were locked up. There, skin color was a factor that prevented advancement, while here, working class or peasant origins often made this advancement harder.

After Poland went through its transformation in 1989, the Penal Code was reformed in 1997 in order to adapt it to the social democratic reality. However, since at least the year 2000, practices typical of neoliberal countries have been pursued. The neoliberal system has encroached on the economy since the very beginning of the democratic transformation. A breakthrough in the penal and prison systems came in 1989, having been prepared by academics and practitioners working together since 1982 or even earlier. With little hope of ever becoming reality in the previous system, working on the reform had been one of the efforts bringing academics and practitioners together. Thus, prison reform was drafted over the last 20 years of the Polish People's Republic, albeit with few prospects for its implementation. There were prison system research groups and there was constant dialog between the prison service and society, at least the academics. There was little love lost between us, we disagreed on many things, but dialog and collaboration were ongoing, whereas nowadays they are practically non-existent. It was amazing. Every year, university students were allowed to enter prisons and conduct research there. It was a great form of citizen control. Prisons were truly open, even in the Polish People's Republic. We prepared the reforms in collaboration with the prison service that would be forced to initiate them, since the country's economy could not bear the costs of running prisons. The reform was implemented in 1991. The prison service was headed by an academic—Paweł Moczydłowski—who was perfectly prepared for the job. The reform brought about a decline in the prison population, the recruitment of qualified staff and work in prison was focused on respect towards the staff as well as preparing inmates to function in society after their release.

J
S: Granted, but Law and Justice appears to be conducting a more progressive social policy in terms of the redistribution

of wealth, while at the same time making punishments in the criminal law more severe.

MP: You're referring to 500+?[4] As opposed to conservative or social democracies, in a neoliberal system, social welfare is vestigial. That is what happening here; many promises, little help. What was supposed to be a subsidy for every child is given for the second one, and is often revoked in the case of single mothers.[5] Those with disabilities are looked down on when demanding equal treatment and dignity (see their 2018 protest in the Polish parliament). Police officers receive raises, while nurses and teachers just political lashings. The constant fundraising campaigns for surgeries and medical help for children organized by Polish parents on the streets and in shops shock the Scandinavians. They thought that what is possible in socially and economically developing countries does not happen here; given the loudly proclaimed universal access to healthcare. Children with disabilities are openly removed from schools. People with disabilities are often condemned to a meager existence due to their practical exclusion from the job market, accompanied by slogans and assurances about inclusiveness. Non-heterosexual and non-cisgender citizens are openly discriminated against, and we openly claim nothing can be done about that while the President declares he will happily sign a bill prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality (*sic!*). In these conditions, it is hard to call the government egalitarian. It is not the case that Law and Justice are conducting a social policy; they are conducting their policy to enslave a large group of people. It leads to the escalation of patriarchal relations and the resulting inequalities. It is not a policy aimed at genuinely reducing the differences between the rich and poor. Poland, China and the UK turn out to be the countries where these differences are the largest. As Marek Szymaniak points out, if we consider factors that significantly affect living conditions, then it turns out that income disparity in Poland matches that of the UK and China, where it is the highest.[6]

4 Family 500+ (Polish: Rodzina 500+) is a social policy introduced by the government of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Eng. Law and Justice) in 2016. It guarantees a monthly amount of 500 zlotys allocated by the state to every child in the family (editor's note).

5 Until May 2019 Family 500+ only covered the first child in low-income families, after that date it was unconditionally extended to each and every child (editor's note).

6 See M. Szymianiak, *Nierówności dochodowe w Polsce jak w Chinach* [Income inequality in Poland matches China's], "kontakt" 16 July 2018, http://magazynkontakt.pl/nierownosci-dochodowe-w-polsce-jak-w-chinach.html [accessed 10.10.2018].

Poland was intentionally set on the neoliberal path and it has established itself there. We do not have social policy resulting in more inclusion, dialog and equality. In, say, Finland it is irrelevant if I come from a small village, a small town or a large city. I will have the same level in math or English, and the same opportunities to function in society. Interestingly, Finland's starting point in the 20th century was similar to ours. We are historically similar but the country follows the Scandinavian model of welfare, where equality between citizens is actively pursued. Our model, however, regardless of the loud anti-Russian rhetoric, is actually closer to the Soviet model. The Scandinavian one avoids replacing the available methods of social control (civil, medical, educational, and economical) with a penal policy. The neoliberal model, including its Polish version, prefers that policy. The Scandinavian model rejects isolating people in prison and making punishments more severe as an indicator of effectiveness of government policies. Poland chooses to go exactly for that.

JS: In the Polish case, what seems interesting is the similarity between the two groups, parties or political blocks that are said to be completely different. On one side we have those who allege to defend democracy and civil society, etc. On the other there are those who favor governing with an iron fist, a strong state with clear hierarchies, exclusion, etc. But both of them pursued a very similar policy in terms of legal severity.

MP: It is here that the other, temporal dimension comes into play. One needs to appreciate that Platforma Obywatelska (Eng. Civic Platform) did not act on their declared policies in their last four years in government. It implemented a policy dictated by Law and Justice. It is quite possible they have a lot in common, but it is no coincidence that a Platform minister, Jarosław Gowin, stood in front of the cameras and proposed a law that violates the fundamental principles of the rule of law.[7] It allows for the indefinite isolation of individuals who have completed their court-imposed sentences, based on a non-specific threat premise that was not in force at the time of their sentencing. The law in question is the Act on Procedures Related to People with Men-

7 Jarosław Gowin left Platforma Obywatelska in 2013 to create his own political party Polska Razem (Eng. Poland Together) which later entered into an electoral coalition with Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in 2015. He is now Minister of Science and Higher Education in the government of Law and Justice (editor's note).

tal Disorders Posing a Threat to Other People's Lives, Health or Sexual Freedom of 22 November 2013 (Journal of Laws of 7 January 2014, item 24). It was no accident that Gowin, rather than calling it Gowin's Law, gave it a name that repels, dehumanizes and diverts attention away from the root of the problem.

That act is in contravention of the rule that the law does not apply retroactively—you cannot punish someone twice for the same offence, and the punishment cannot be retroactively changed to a more severe one than the one that the original sentence was based on. Indefinite imprisonment is a more severe sentence, considered inhumane by the European Court of Human Rights. Gowin's law violates these constitutional guarantees and by doing so, makes a mockery of the commitment to respect individual freedom and dignity.

J
S: So essentially, violating the constitution is not exclusively the new government's achievement.

M
P: The law itself was immaterial. It was more of a litmus test. It was meant to see how and by what means the constitutional rule of law could be ignored and violated. It was used to see whether—by spreading fear and moral panic, invoking "vicious commies" and fueling a lust for revenge —the Parliament, the President and the Constitutional Tribunal would agree to circumvent and violate the Constitution. It was a test and it was clear that if this has been done once, it will be easier later on. The Tribunal can be bypassed too, thus concentrating power in one hand to break the constitution at will. Ostensibly, the law was passed to deal with criminals previously sentenced to death for particularly violent crimes who were getting released from prison after 25 years. As if there were no legal tools for that already. There were and still are such measures. A man was singled out whose death sentence was changed to 25 years' imprisonment. In breach of the law, the Minister of Justice revealed the man's identity and depicted the case as if it had happened the day before. Thus Gowin set a precedent for changing standards in violation of the rule of law that embodies the principles of social justice.

Parliament gave up, the President was blackmailed and the Constitutional Tribunal also ceded. It did so even though, while delivering its verdict in 2016, it had full knowledge of the

abuses in the application of this Act. And yet it apparently lacked the courage to state the obvious: the Act is unconstitutional.

JS: The Tribunal was still presided by Andrzej Rzepliński then...

MP: That the Constitutional Tribunal inexplicably decided to declare this Act as mostly constitutional (the Tribunal's judgment of 23 November 2016, Ref. No. K 6/14) does not change the fact that Justice Andrzej Wróbel's arguments sound more convincing. In his dissenting opinion, he distanced himself from the other judges' decision (Andrzej Rzepliński was the Reporting Judge). The fact that the act itself was ruled as constitutional by the Tribunal does not mean that its enforcement is also constitutional.

Yes, it was still "the other" Constitutional Tribunal.[8] The same one who did not dare say that the widening interpretation of the conscience clause[9] is illegal and unconstitutional (Judgment of 7 October 2015, Ref. No. K 12/14; with Justice Małgorzata Pyziak-Szafnicka as the Reporting Judge). The very same one who allowed the rule of law to be flouted. For citizens to trust the state it has to fulfill its commitments and avoid arbitrary actions. Yet the bill prepared by Civic Platform took part of the pension away from everyone who worked for the Security Service [the secret police in communist Poland—translator's note] simply because they were employed by it. A contract is not binding if it was made in violation of the law. And here, without validating any reason, it was declared that, due to the mere fact that you worked for the Security Service, the law and the commitments of the state can be ignored (Judgment of 24 February 2010, Ref. No. 6/09). Andrzej Rzepliński was the Reporting Judge; six other justices filed ample dissenting opinions, including Ewa Łętowska, Mirosław Wyrzykowski and Bohdan Zdziennicki. These judgments are like stones precipitating an avalanche. In normal conditions, the revision of these judgments could be achieved in further cases. But we did not make it far enough. The avalanche started, destroying and undermining the foundations of the rule of law.

The above-mentioned judgments and Gowin's Law show how much can be achieved by appealing to emotions and basic instincts. We do have quite a few of these in us. We are a society

8 A series of infamous reforms of the judiciary conducted by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość did not change the operation nor composition of Constitutional Tribunal at that moment (editor's note).

9 "Conscience clause" refers to the rule in medical law that allows a gynecologist to refuse to perform abortion if it goes against his or her conscience (editor's note).

trained for over 70 years in divisions, inner hostilities and disdain for others on many levels —Security Service agents, thugs, beasts.[10] It proved to be enough to turn our backs on constitutional commitments to abide by legal standards and human rights. If that is the case, though, things are looking down for us—for our freedom, for a chance at the rule of law and high living standards. It is quite emblematic that in Denmark, the Second World War lasted for just eight hours with one fatality—a man who was riding his motorbike too fast. Then they surrendered. Protecting people was their priority. Of course, their geopolitical situation was distinct and the Germans saw them differently in terms of race. (Not all of them, obviously, but the fate of Danish Jews was incomparably better because efforts were made to transport them to Sweden, which stayed neutral.) The need to protect people was clear to the Danes. Human life is of fundamental value. During the war, they envisaged the time after the war. People would be necessary to carry on building the country together. We, on the other hand, through political decisions indulge ourselves in making the Warsaw Uprising—a heroic and reckless insurgency, bordering on an atrocity—into a model for future actions and a test in patriotism. It is deadly, immature and irresponsible.

10 Gowin's Law has been nicknamed "Beasts Law" by the media as it targets particularly violent criminals (editor's note).

I see a connection between the ease with which people were sent to die during the war and the post-war facility to ruthlessly and irrationally deprive us of our freedom, destroy our lives and send people to prison. How easily we call someone a criminal shows a lack of awareness of the fact that, if one in every six citizens has some sort of prison history, we are in a way broken by imprisonment practices. To teach freedom in prison is like teaching someone how to fly in a submarine. An open society requires respect for another person's freedom, as much as for one's own. Imprisonment and enslavement undermine that respect, to say the least.

JS: Do you think that, after 1989, anyone has truly attempted to create an open society?

MP: In terms of legal culture, there have been several such attempts in recent decades. In 1980 there were attempts to reform the Penal Code to place an emphasis precisely on respecting freedom. Then, the 1997 Penal Code aimed to reevaluate the con-

cepts of crime and punishment. Its creators were aware that building an open society was at stake. The aim was to shift from neoliberalism towards a country that would at least be social democratic, hence the emphasis on taking the victim's interests into account, giving them a voice, leading to the introduction of mediation.

JS: Right, it is important to state it clearly: the ever-increasing punitiveness does not lead to improvements in terms of better social practices and a reduction in crime.

MP: Indeed it does not; and that is not its purpose, either.

JS: It might not be that clear-cut to someone who does not follow legal developments and statistics. Ziobro appears to invoke some sort of common sense by saying that people do horrible things and need to be punished. Once we punish them, they will stop doing those horrible things.

MP: Really?

JS: That is what he says.

MP: For one thing, all crime rates drop in developed countries. It is a clear, long-term trend that has little to do with current policies. The rates actually increased after Law and Order came to power, as a clear result of encouraging forceful behavior, allowing hate speech, intentional division and exclusion. When people call for more severe punishments, it usually indicates dissatisfaction with the ruling class. Stricter penalties are demanded by those who are scared and cannot expect help and satisfaction; which, in turn, points to poor governance. A government that proposes harsher punishments is like the proverbial ostrich that thinks that if it buries its head in the sand, the problem will disappear. When asked if they feel safe in their neighborhoods, people actually say they do, so it is about a different kind of threat. One related with a loss of control over your own fate. A person needs safety, self-worth, autonomy and influence over what goes on in their life. When these things are not there, complaints appear about the ruling class and how they govern. In this situation, a cunning politician comes out to say that criminals are to blame for these feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. This was the predominant narrative in 1970s Poland. It is resurfacing now,

after twenty something years of effort towards building a democratic country with the rule of law. When adhered to by the ruling class, the constitution satisfies those needs. When violated, it cuts the ground from under our feet. The constitution is a contract between an individual and the ruling class. When they brush it off, in reality they disregard us.

It was, of course, a mistake—as well as a sin—on the part of previous governments not to have pursued a reduction in cultural, social and economic inequalities among various groups of people. They thought the invisible hand of the market would solve the whole thing, even though it was obvious that it would not. Their original sins were the other mistake: religion was introduced in schools in violation of the law. Starting this way sends a signal that nothing has changed; the "Reds" were replaced by the "Blacks", but there are still those who can do more. The elderly and the dispossessed were told to "get lost", they are no longer necessary. People who brought about the overthrow—workers, bureaucrats and farmers, perhaps to a lesser extent, but in general all those who mobilized without knowing how it all would end in the 1980s—were marginalized. How was it possible to close down State Agricultural Enterprises from one day to the next? Not all of them were evil. By doing so, not only were the means of agricultural production done away with, but also—more importantly—people. It should not have been done this way.

Then, young people from not necessarily wealthy or well-educated families and circles were told that "if you cannot take charge of your own life, you can only blame yourself." They heard that "you are irrelevant if you do not have dough and coattail benefits." My entire generation who grew up in the Polish People's Republic got to where they are by themselves, but precisely because—for instance—university education was free. We were told over and over again that all people are equal. We had access to the Palace of Culture and Science, cultural centers and everything else, regardless of our level of wealth. Then it suddenly ended. Nowadays it is clear that English classes, acrobatic gymnastics and tennis at a decent level are reserved only for the well-off.

There is one more huge difference. I was proud of coming from a humble background, because it meant we were honest. After 1989, that perception changed: if you're worse off, it means you're mediocre, unresourceful and—rather than proud—it was

something to be ashamed of. The shift in this narrative is substantial. And allowing it stems from neglect, but also from our history, a practice of looking down at people and ignoring them.

JS: Can you elaborate on how this type of social and political differences affects legal culture?

MP: I was trying to figure out why in one country a prison term of one, two or three years is seen as trivial, while in another it seems that three months' imprisonment is seen as a long-term punishment. How it is that the differences in the meaning of freedom and respecting it are so vast? Comparing Polish and Scandinavian prison systems, I realized they come from the historically-motivated attitudes to freedom. Egalitarianism fosters feelings of community, shared responsibility and respect for the individual. This results in adherence to the law, decency and respect.

Looking closely at the differences in the development of Poland and the Scandinavian countries, I was arduously getting to the point that Dignan and Cavatino expressed brilliantly. The attitudes to freedom and imprisonment stem from the social perceptions of freedom and closeness to others. There, even a criminal is—as the Norwegians say—*en av oss*: one of us. They do not become an outsider. It makes you wonder what went wrong and how we can remedy it. It is not a question of taking on blame. It is a matter of accepting responsibility. It translates into the way of life, communication, accounting for public funds and the actions undertaken. In Scandinavian countries, when a minister proposes that punishments be increased, there are two questions: what the financial and social costs would be, and whether it would be effective. We do not ask such questions. We want the criminal to suffer, to rot in prison. The MP Jerzy Niesiołowski wrote a book *Wysoki Brzeg* [Eng: *High Riverbank*]. It beautifully recounts the harsh years he spent in prison. And, in fact, he is the one to say something like: "We thought they would rot in prison" when talking about prisoners whose death sentence was changed to 25 years. But perhaps that is what prison does to people. It numbs the feelings of those behind bars, which later spreads to others? But there are guards and educators working in prison too, are there not? I do not think it would sit well with them to hear they contribute to people "rotting" in prison.

JS: You mentioned two reforms—in 1980 and in 1997—as attempts to bring about something more egalitarian and inclu-

sive. Could you outline the main aims and aspects of these reforms?

MP: First and foremost, the main aim of criminal law was established so that the guilty party ought to be punished and the innocent should not. The second aim was to prevent crimes from being committed. Thirdly, it should aid the interests of the victim, which are protected under the law, while—at the same time—respecting their individual dignity. It is quite revolutionary; rather than focusing on retribution and revenge, typically pursued by the ruling class, it sets great store by the victim's interests. If my wallet gets stolen, what do I want? For the thief to end up in prison for three years? If so, not only do I lose the wallet and its contents, but my taxes will be spent on the thoughtless dehumanizing of the person who stole it, rather than on a park, a school, efficient healthcare or a nice café in the neighborhood. Wouldn't I prefer to be given the wallet back with an apology and to reflect how to prevent it from happening in the future? Let us not fool ourselves, such offences will carry on occurring. But—perhaps—instead of intimidating with the severity of the punishments, it is better to ponder how thefts could be curtailed?

In order for criminal law to work properly, it must also be considered which type of damage to society the trial and punishment are intended to repair. If someone breaks into our apartment, the trauma we experience is somewhat similar to that caused by rape—we no longer feel safe in our own homes. Perhaps psychological assistance or a support group should be provided? Mediation—for instance—helps to alleviate anxiety and allows us to see what upsets us in a different light. Many things occur apart from the punishable act that have yet to be identified. That is the case with domestic violence, for example. Many people find little solace in how the justice system works. It is worth acknowledging that.

JS: That gets us closer to restorative justice.

MP: Yes, certain elements of it appear in both the 1980 and 1997 reforms. It is a shift that requires a certain respect for the person, the citizen. Before that, the aim of a punishment was rehabilitation and general prevention, in the sense of deterring others from committing crimes. In other words, we were all treated as a potential gang of criminals. Rather than being deterring from

crime, today's general prevention is meant to provide information on what we do with people who break the law through the example of the punishment applied at sentencing; i.e. to show what is forbidden and what is required, and how the justice system deals with it.

JS: Which constitutes an educative, rather than a punitive aim, does not it?

MP: Not even that—we do not pretend to educate, we just inform. Another related major change is that we eliminate the concept of rehabilitation, although it happens rather inconsistently. We suppress this term from the Penal Code (PC), though it is naturally included in the Executive Penal Code (EPC). We have stopped pretending to teach people how to fly in a submarine, which—essentially—the former idea of resocialization was. We expected inmates to make themselves better people. A person can improve, but we ought to provide appropriate conditions for that. In the EPC there is a beautiful phrase by Professor Zofia Ostrihańska: "We aim for people to want to follow the rules." We do not pretend that grown men and women will be transformed into angels in conditions that are far from heavenly. Under Article 67 of the EPC, imprisonment is meant to encourage the inmate to collaborate in shaping socially desirable attitudes in themselves, especially a feeling of personal responsibility and abiding by the law, thus refraining from reoffending. We do not sermonize and pretend that prison educates people. What is more, prison is supposed to provide the inmate with the right conditions for acquiring social competence. It is therefore the staff's duty rather than the prisoner's. This is important. The Code does not place the responsibility for their rehabilitation on the inmate, but rather offers this opportunity to the people who work there. Apparently we are not terribly consistent in that, as later on the term rehabilitation is used several times in that same Executive Penal Code. We do not seem to be able to abandon the carrot and the stick approach just yet. We might be using this term to boost the staff's sense of self-worth and give symbolic meaning to their work.

Another key part of the reforms was the change in the classification of punishments. Before, imprisonment was the preferred punishment, with a fine being the last resort. Currently it is exactly the other way round. The preferred punishments

are those that do not involve prison time. First, a fine is considered, then a restriction of liberty order; leaving imprisonment as the last resort. It is emphasized in Article 55 of the Penal Code. The penal process became more civilized in 1997, drawing on Solidarity's projects from the early 1980s. Our aim was to treat a punishment not as something that destroys a person, but rather makes them incur a debt that they pay back by doing their time in prison. The assumption of the 1997 Penal Code was that a person's deed was evil, not the person themselves. Unfortunately, putting that mindset into practice is proving to be an uphill struggle.

The tendency to treat a person as evil and dangerous completely undermines the premises of the 1997 Penal Code. It is also quite dangerous, as it opens the door to indulgent and arbitrary latitude in eliminating the individual labeled as dangerous. This label, in turn, can be attached to virtually anyone nowadays, including simply by falling into disfavor with the authorities.

The symptoms of failing to see the threat of arbitrariness also emerge in the attitude of the police. By law, officers should caution rather than fine. It does not bode well when police officers say they will caution… as part of work-to-rule, or that the income from fines is set out in advance in the state's budget (*sic!*).

JS: That is not really new…

MP: No, in the Polish People's Poland, the budget included not only the estimated income from prison labor, but also additional labor, as part of the so-called *subbotnik*. The fact that there was often no demand for what they produced was immaterial in the planned economy. What mattered was the plan and that prisoners exceeded it, as planned.

JS: Has this reflection on the penal system in Polish People's Republic achieved anything in the Third Republic of Poland?

MP: What had been under preparation for those 20 years was implemented in 1991. In January 1991 there were 130 thousand inmates, whereas by October it was only 40 thousand. I was invited by the Swedes back then to speak about how the Poles had achieved it. How had we managed to release these people, pro-

vide them with housing, jobs and prepare our society for their return? In reality, unfortunately, no one took care of what would happen to them once they left prison. Admittedly, though, the reduction in the prison population was also the result of preference given to restriction of liberty orders and suspended sentences. A conscious effort was made to eliminate long-term prison sentences, which are typical of totalitarian systems, and also a key point on Minister Ziobro's political agenda. It is well-known, however, that instead of solving social problems, imprisonment often compounds them.

J
S: Yet this positive trend broke down at some point. Otherwise we would not be where we are...

M
P: The reform took decades to prepare for and only one year to destroy it. Lech Kaczyński became Minister of Justice in 2000.[11] He immediately started a conflict with the courts. His method of subjugating courts consisted in using the Prosecutor's Office under his purview to extend warrants for temporary arrest. Prisons are not made of rubber. It led to increasing the space used to detail people, at the expense of prison space, which—in turn—brought back the problem of overcrowding. Prison overcrowding results in a total disintegration of everything: work principles, shaping attitudes, education, cultural projects, changing views and behavior. We can only focus on preserving order and safety. This happened in the year 2000. Overcrowding also leads to a situation where the guards are not necessarily the ones really in control of a prison. It can also create an irresistible temptation to abuse power in order to maintain the appearance of staying in control. Lech Kaczyński was at the helm of the Ministry of Justice for only a year, but he spoiled what we had been working on for over 30 years. Of course, to be fair, it was the judges who issued temporary arrest warrants. It was them who organized their work in such a way that effectively the assistant judges took these decisions. Assistant judges who were irresponsible, young, inexperienced, scared and keeping their heads down. It also demonstrates the importance of maturity, independence and a full judicial autonomy.

11 Lech Kaczyński was the twin brother of Jarosław Kaczyński, today's leader of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. He became Polish president in 2005. He died in an airplane crash in 2010 (editor's note).

J
S: Let us talk some more about these plans that did not entirely become reality, though. Ultimately, we are interested

in a utopia… If I understand correctly, the move towards restorative justice consists in the punishment being less about retribution or rehabilitation, and mostly about reparation, right?

MP: That is an important element, but there is more to it: taking a person's freedom and autonomy seriously. It is about not exploiting and pretending that we are solving any problems through sentencing. For it to work, we need to consider what the benefits of a punishment are for the victims. If the only thing we are offering them is the satisfaction of getting back at somebody, it completely misses the point. Or, at least, that shouldn't be the case.

JS: What does "restoration" in the term "restorative justice" relate to? What is being restored?

MP: Human relationships, the well-being of victims and the harm done are all repaired. Restorative justice is a general term that refers to a multitude of legal and practical solutions. Restorative justice at its core allows for—in situations stipulated in the law—the possibility of reaching a consensus and conducting negotiations between the victim and the offender. It facilitates the shortening and simplification of the legal process and makes it possible to establish the best form of compensation for the damage caused. No third party takes part in the negotiation; thus there is no control over how it proceeds. Due to the presence of a mediator and the established procedures, the negotiation ensures an appropriate mechanism to settle the form of compensation of the person affected by the action meeting the definition of a crime under the Penal Code. In both the Code of Criminal Procedure and the PC, the importance of mediation is clearly emphasized as a means to aid the victim affected by the crime.

Restorative justice in the form of restorative justice conferences extends beyond the interests of the victim alone. In this framework it is recognized that the individual who was robbed is not the only victim of the robbery, but the entire community is, in a way. A robbery also erodes the general sense of security, making community members uneasy, even if they were not directly affected. A restorative justice conference takes into account the fact that the scope of action of the justice system

does not only entail satisfying the victim's needs or serving justice to the offender, but also involves restoring a sense of social order and well-being. Increasing the severity of punishments does not meet these needs.

J
S: Is it a utopian project or an already existing practice?

M
P: There are countries where these practices exist. In New Zealand, for instance, where this system most likely originated, but also in Australia and the UK, where restorative justice is applied after sentencing. In Austria it is applied in juvenile cases. It is also established in the English legal system. It involves negotiation, mediation and conferences, mostly after sentencing. New Zealand uses only restorative justice conferences. Initially this solution was applied to juvenile Maori offenders, later on to all juvenile delinquents, and finally it was extended to the entire penal process. France allows for mediation during preparatory proceedings initiated by the prosecutor. In the case of Poland, our procedures do not officially provide for restorative justice conferences, but negotiation and mediation is allowed during the preparatory proceedings and court proceedings. Mediation can and does occur after the verdict is delivered, but there are no relevant regulations in the EPC.

What I said about negotiation, mediation and restorative justice refers to model procedures. In practice, their application is not only limited to criminal law. They are applicable in administrative, civil and family law, taking the form of various configurations of these basic models. We can envisage a system where various elements of negotiation, mediation and restorative justice conferences function together. They can also go by different names. Their application is not only limited to solving conflicts between the perpetrator and the victim, or the plaintiff and the defendant. They can be used in neighbor relations and disputes, in disagreements between the local authorities and the inhabitants and also in armed conflicts.

J
S: It has always struck me that serving justice is seen in this approach firstly as a communicative process.

M
P: That is indeed the task of restorative justice. It fosters compromise, which requires good communication. Because of the the-

ater, convention and procedure of the criminal court, there is no room for "talking things over", since the latter requires listening, rather than interrogating a person. It necessitates a real and active immersion in the story and its many threads. The court eliminates most of it; it focuses on matching the facts to their descriptions in the law. Restorative justice is geared towards empathically listening to a human story of what happened and how it affected the individual. There is no room in court for the nuances and emotions that an event provoked. In a criminal court, guilt must be proven. It is no coincidence when we say that the court determines substantive truth. This material truth is not about what really happened; it is a truth dissected from reality to match the legal criteria of a crime and the conditions allowing for the application of a punishment under the prerequisites of criminal procedure.

In negotiations, mediation and restorative justice conferences there is also room for a slightly different truth on every occasion. Negotiations involve finding one on which both sides will eventually agree. In mediation, facts are established but the perpetrator does not necessarily have to feel guilty. Yes, an accident occurred but, for instance, I did not cause it, it was the injured party who stepped onto the road. This is not the case with the model of restorative justice conference. It has to always be preceded by an admission of guilt and remorse on the side of the perpetrator. The starting point here would be for me to apologize for causing the accident.

We have not progressed enough yet in terms of practices and relationships where the courtroom would be a suitable place for apologizing. I remember a shocking scene: a great young man, Harvard and Fulbright scholarship holder, was killed by 15-year-old youths to whom beer had been sold. They got drunk and beat him to death with baseball bats. It was a tragedy for both sides, but in the courtroom it went down like this: the judge said "Please rise" to the father of the murdered young man, then said to the accused: "Please rise. Apologize to the injured party."

JS: Dreadful.

MP: Indeed. It is dreadful, but in accordance with the regulations. They stipulate an act of apology and the judge has carried it out, albeit in a rather insensitive way. It shows that perhaps the place

for it is not ideal, and that the judges might not be well-prepared for it. They can say they are not supposed to show emotions since they have to be impartial. In the mentioned case, however, this impartiality was misguided. Lack of bias does not exclude sensitivity, empathy and humane behavior. They might be hard to come by, however, as they are not priorities in training or the assessment of a court's performance. We do not teach empathy enough, or teach it properly at university. There is no custom of having obligatory ethics or communication lectures in law schools or medical schools, despite being traditionally taught in many prestigious universities around the world. The fact that they are not present on our syllabi shows how little attention we pay to promoting respect towards individual dignity, freedom and autonomy.

JS: When you talk about restorative justice and how it emphasizes communication, negotiation and mediation, it does somehow link to a certain vision for the functioning of society as a whole. We started with a diagnosis of links between the approach to criminal law and inequality, as well as socioeconomic policy. The way I see it, restorative justice goes beyond being a vision for an event, i.e. a trial in a court of law. It is a certain type of sociology, anthropology, an outlook on what society is and how an individual functions in it.

MP: It might well be the case. It is a continuation of the answer to the question of what an individual is—are individuals subordinate to the ruling class and supposed to serve it, or does the government consciously respect our dignity, thus treating us as empowered individuals. Such treatment requires solutions—including legal ones—that contribute to a better quality of life. Creating and enforcing the law requires a deliberate reflection on whether the existing standards contribute to maintaining and improving well-being. Do they ensure favorable conditions for us to fulfill our potential? Does our education teach us to think and resolve problems, or does it instill fearful obedience? Do the existing policies foster the principles of social justice or create inequalities? When we prioritize building relationships based on self-reliance, independence and autonomy, we work to create a system in which people have access to housing, rather than to prisons. To health, rather than to a struggle to stay healthy.

We create opportunities for finding work and, when unavailable, the means to survive while looking for a job, rather than long-term unemployment, homelessness and hopelessness. We provide preventive mental care rather than indefinite isolation on the pretense of personality disorders. In a system geared towards every person's value, criminal and penal laws are of minimal importance. The Government is based on mutual trust, rather than threats of repression.

J
S: In this context, restorative justice is also a means of empowerment, i.e. increasing the degree of people's autonomy by giving them an opportunity to actively take part in the process of serving justice, rather than making them into pawns moved on the chessboard by lawyers, judges, prosecutors, etc.

M
P: Absolutely. Nils Christie wrote a short article in 1973 that is still valid and used today. He claims that lawyers have stolen conflict from people.[12] It is of course a metaphor for the process of serving justice in which the victim has no say. In a neoliberal, totalitarian and authoritarian system, the harm to the victim is appropriated by those in power. A violation of the law is seen by the authorities as showing disrespect towards them. They do not seek the restitution of social order, but rather retribution. Weak regimes must hit hard to fake power.

12 Gowin's Law has been nicknamed "Beasts Law" by the media as it targets particularly violent criminals (editor's note).

The implementation of mediation as a means of restorative justice in criminal law undermines the idea of criminal law as a weapon of the regime. Mediation takes the victim's needs and interests into consideration. It is not simple, easy or quick, but when put into practice, it gradually brings about a change in attitudes. In our country, this process was successfully initiated by Janina Waluk in the 1980s. Since 2005, when Law and Justice came to power, they made sure to put a stop to that process. All they needed to do in order to achieve this goal is to lower the standards required for mediators, limit access to training and convince the judges that they themselves can conduct mediation.

J
S: Are there any political groups that are interested in putting restorative justice into practice? Has anyone from Razem [Eng. *Together*; a new left-wing political party in Po-

land—translator's note] or any other political party approached you and said it would be a great idea? Someone who was not just interested in attacking Mr. Ziobro, but rather in implementing comprehensive and progressive solutions.

MP: No, no one has come to me, but that does not mean there is no interest in mediation. Nor has mediation stopped developing. I think it is growing in the areas of administrative and family law; there is arbitration and I know of student groups at universities that are dedicated to mediation. However, the main publications, which were coming out for years, such as "The Mediator" or our books on mediation and restorative justice, they all belong to the previous decade.

JS: Does that mean that the left is not interested in restorative justice, either?

MP: In Poland, even the left is very right-wing. Why would it be interested?

JS: And the left that is not so right-wing has been dominated by Carl Schmitt's social ontology in their outlook on society. It says that the world is made up of friends and enemies, and the aim is to strengthen the friend camp at the expense of the enemy camp. We do not talk to each other, we do not mediate or seek a reconciliatory solution, but flex our muscles instead. Chantal Mouffe says that we turn antagonism into agonism—it is not about physically eliminating the other side, but more about symbolically dominating it and getting your own way. In such a vision, there is little room for the communicative, mediatory, egalitarian and horizontal approach.

MP: Considering the experiences of the previous system, it seemed such a vision had little chance of returning, yet a lot happened in those 30 years. The question remains about how to establish such institutions and develop them, which is essential for the survival of the values that restorative justice stands for. In theory, the Penal Code contains rules and solutions that favor mediation. Yet it is easy to hinder it when criteria other than a high quality of mediation prevail. If judges are assessed on output statistics and ticking off cases, or on verdicts convenient for the government; if, instead of the qualifications of mediators, the motivation for sending cases for mediation is to get them out of

the courts; if mediation is treated simply as a bin for uncomfortable cases, then this concept will be hollow. There are also cases where mediation is not the way to go.

JS: Which ones?

MP: Mediation is not used when the perpetrator is addicted to drugs (alcohol is also a drug) as they are deemed unable to fulfill their commitments. Neither do we resort to it when family abuse is recent, because in such cases the balance between the parties cannot be ensured. It is not used when a person is mentally disturbed, since they are unable to rationally participate in the process, or when the conditions for mediation or its aims are not feasible. Mediation is a form of working out and accepting a commitment, a civil law agreement whose aim is to effectively restore order. In most cases, a criminal sentence does not ensure that, whereas mediation offers a chance of it. That is why implementing certain regulations is not enough. What is needed are standards and established practices. We tried to act by organizing training for judges all over Poland, as well as in Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia. The "Mediator" journal, published over several years, aimed to introduce certain methods and practices, outlining case studies and solutions. A foundation was genuinely being built for including mediation in the penal process. What does not help is the populist tightening of punishments, hoping the problem will resolve itself.

JS: Do you think we are now dealing with a temporary backward step, or the start of a slippery slope? You said this movement had existed and been built up over years or decades and found a voice in the legislation, in the 1997 Penal Code. At some point—when Law and Justice came into power for the first time—it broke down.

MP: And it has not been rebuilt.

JS: Are you optimistic about it, or do you think it was squandered for good and we are heading for some kind of Third Reich? How else can I put it...

MP: I'm not sure if a comparison with the Third Reich is fitting here.

JS: I would treat it somewhat metaphorically: as a certain system that will not be the embodiment of restorative justice,

but rather its antithesis. Do you see that materializing, or do you think anything can still be salvaged and rebuilt?

MP: The first step for an authoritarian system is to concentrate power. Then it brings the judiciary under its control. Finally, it resorts to violence and the elimination of their opponents with total impunity. Such conditions do not foster restorative justice. The situation we are living in today seems to be consistent with the steps taken to establish an authoritarian regime. Of course, everything can be saved and rebuilt. The question is when? I see what is happening around the "deform"[13] and the dismantling of judicial independence. I can see who volunteers for a career in the Supreme Court, despite the unconstitutional job offers. They know that what matters is obedience rather than qualifications and that they do not necessarily meet the experience and character requirements. Once they are in, will they remain there for years? It is easy to demolish and hard to build. Perhaps, however, we can hope that some social energy will be awakened. It does not only translate into dressing statues in T-shirts with the word "Constitution" written on them, or painting the emblem of the "Fighting Poland" everywhere, just like during the Nazi occupation. There are examples of genuine attempts at rebuilding the courts. I will give one, related with the previously-mentioned Gowin's Law. Even though the Constitutional Tribunal declared the law constitutional, it does not mean—as I said before—that its enforcement is also constitutional. It is important to note that the Supreme Court has just had their say by passing a resolution (Ref. No: III CZP 75/18) stating that, in a case falling under the scope of Gowin's Law, the relevant regulations from the Code of Civil Procedure indeed apply, but that it is unacceptable to issue an injunctive provision against an individual subject to criminal proceedings, thereby placing them in the National Centre for the Prevention of Dissocial Behaviors; a measure already taken in many cases. Thus the Supreme Court has clearly said there is a red line for the infringement on and arbitrary deprivation of personal freedom. The predilection for preventive imprisonment is dangerous. We have created a system in which a psychologist, psychiatrist or sexologist are to declare that a given person is a threat: high or very high. We do not know what "high" means

13 A neologism used widely to criticize many reforms undertaken by the current Polish administration—like ones of schools, judiciary system or universities—that are rather de-forming than re-forming its object (editor's note).

here, or how to characterize the "very high" threat, or how they are to tell the future from tea leaves. What we do know is that a psychologist, psychiatrist or sexologist need a job. They are well-paid for these assessments and have a sword hanging over their heads. If the person they assess reoffends, they could be held liable. This is because we have included an article in the Penal Code that allows for court-appointed experts to be sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment if they are found guilty of the attestation of an untruth, or three years if an erroneous assessment was made unintentionally. Thus, a potential sentence threatens both judges and experts. A perverted catch was therefore created in the system. It cannot be determined that someone will not do anything bad and there exists a possibility of indefinite confinement on the pretext of treatment.

JS: These combinations cannot be coincidental.

MP: They are not. At first we thought this could only occur in Erdogan's Turkey. Then, that Warsaw could not be turned into Budapest. Sadly, now we see that we are infecting other countries; Czechia, Slovakia, Italy, Austria. From the east there blows a brown, rightist, nationalist, sexist, xenophobic, trans- and homophobic, racist wind. It is a threat to freedom and civil liberties, and does not foster restorative justice. But—perhaps—come spring, everything will change for the better…?[14]

14 The interview was completed in October 2018 (editor's note).

Translated by Artur Kociałkowski

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JAN
SOWA

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA ŚWIETLIK AND MARCIN KOZIEJ

TECHNOLOGIES (IN THE SERVICE) OF DEMOCRACY

JAN SOWA: According to a well-known opinion from Karl Marx, humanity sets itself such goals as can be achieved with the material means available. From that perspective, if we look at the last 50, 100, 200 or 500 years—since the time of Thomas More's *Utopia*—we will notice that something very strange has happened. Material means and opportunities have expanded dramatically. We are in a position in which, as far as we know, mankind has never been before: never have we been able to do so much in terms of the material means at our disposal. But if we look at the weakness of today's utopian thinking and searching for radical alternatives to the *status quo*, it looks, paradoxically, as if we have gone backwards from what the people of the past dreamed. This can even be noticed over the few last decades. American historian Lawrence Goodwyn, author of *Breaking the Barriers*, which is, in my opinion, the best book written about the origins of the Solidaność movement,[1] argues that the idea of an overall transformation of the world, put forth by Solidarność, would have been more readily understood in the 18th century than it is now. It would fit well with the debates amongst socio-political radicals of that time and with their visions of constructing an entirely new society.

1 See L. Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

One part of this atrophy of imagination is the absence of a well-articulated progressively critical project that would take new technological possibilities into account. We all have sorts of liberal fantasies such as, for example, Elon Musk's interplanetary capitalism, in which technology plays a major role. Of course, the idea is, so to say, inadvertently ironic, because it is not clear whether the earth will continue to be a multispecies planet, yet man already wants to become a multiplanetary species. Conservatives have their visions

as well, and those visions have little to do with technology. Basically regressive and reactionary, they are what Zygmunt Bauman calls retrotopias: looking towards something splendid from the past, some wonderful organization models and values that we must, in their opinion, go back to. Progressively critical circles, on the other hand, are mostly busy fighting fires and patching holes. All the causes they focus on are extremely important and worthwhile, but the problem is the lack of a broader vision of what the world should be like. This also refers to ideas of how to use the recent technological inventions in progressive ways.

We are past a naive techno-utopia, which thrived between 1995 and 2015. It was a period of fascination with the internet, conceived as a tool of self-organization. After the Twitter troll factories and scandals like Cambridge Analytica, that belief is hard to sustain. What can we do about it?

MARIA ŚWIETLIK: First of all, we should talk a little bit about where that hope came from. It is important to remember that, so later we can ask ourselves what went wrong. There is a very nice book, available for free at prawokultury.pl, that I highly recommend reading. The title is *Freedom in the Cloud*, and it is written by Eben Moglen, a law professor and one of the initiators of the Free Software Movement.[2] He and Richard Stallman once introduced free software licenses, and free software is precisely the area where success proved possible. The book begins with a text titled *The dotCommunist Manifesto*. It is a literary fancy, but also an attempt to express that kind of hope. Marx believed that a revolution would be made by the working class, the industrialized proletariat. There are two interpretations trying to explain why Marx saw the proletariat as agents of change. One says that proletarians were the ones most immersed in the then-new technology and subordinated by it. The other interpretation argues that they were the ones who had the physical control of the machines. So, on one side, there was a psychologizing concept of prole-

2 See E. Moglen, *Wolność w chmurze*, tłum. M. Koziej i in., Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, Warszawa 2013, http://prawokultury.pl/media/entry/attach/Wolnosc_w_chmurze_i_ inne_eseje_-_Eben_Moglen.pdf [accessed on 01.06.2019]. For similar content in English see E. Moglen, *Freedom In the Cloud: Software Freedom, Privacy, and Security for Web 2.0 and Cloud Computing. A Speech given by Eben Moglen at a meeting of the Internet Society's New York branch on Feb 5, 2010*, https://www.softwarefreedom.org/events/ 2010/isoc-ny/FreedomInTheCloud-transcript.html [accessed on 01.06.2019] (editor's note).

tarians being those who best understand the sources of their oppression, and so they are more prone to rebellion, they have the necessary radicalism. On the other hand, there was the explanation stating that it was not about their personal experience, but about being at the heart of capitalist production, where value was generated. This meant they had a chance to literally pull the lever and halt the production in the workplace, which translated to the possibility of destabilizing capitalism and stopping the production of value, which was the basis of the capitalists' power.

Here is the question that we might also try asking today: Is the internet at the heart of capitalist, or turbo-capitalist, production today? Moglen believes that it is. To a great extent, he is right when he says that the rights to so-called intellectual property, which means commodified information, are now where value is being created. He believes this is why the digital world can be the nucleus of a revolution driven by creatives. When I say creatives, it is not in the narrow sense of artists, but all those who produce information; who originate the data that the system feeds on. The propertied class of the present day are trying to commodify every aspect of information and communication—either through copyright laws, or by data extraction. This is what the so-called intellectual property rights are about: to prevent us from making use of the creative possibilities offered by technology, and to make us its mere consumers. So there is a tension between technological possibilities that tell everyone: "Take it and create!", and legal regimes, backed by actual economic interests that, typically for capitalism, strive at attaining monopoly. We will not become revolutionary agents until we tap into those creative possibilities.

MARCIN KOZIEJ: When I was reflecting on the question of online common goods, I first thought about some disillusionments, because right now we are at the point of a major disillusionment. We used to believe that "Twitter revolutions"[3] would be liberating people in oppressive countries, but it has actually backlashed against those very people. We believed in Facebook, but it has turned out that there is censorship there, as well as fake news. We also believed in pirating and some cultural circulation that would overthrow the

3 The term is sometimes used in reference to the Arab Spring of 2011 and subsequent revolts in Europe (Indignados) and the United States (Occupy movements) (editor's note).

media giants, but at the end of the day we are all using Spotify or Netflix because of convenience, while the creators are paid peanuts. Today, the thesis about the internet being a place for spreading democracy, where everybody can enter egalitarian communication, comes under much criticism. It is rather believed that power and capital are the winners. And that is it—the web just enables them to intensify value extraction.

I have also been thinking about common goods, both existing ones and those yet to be conceived of, and I remembered Mathieu O'Neil's *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*.[4] The author has done sociological research on specific projects such as Wikipedia, the operating system Debian, and one of the Linux distributions, as well as some online forums, mailing lists and so on. He tried to discover how those common goods are created, focusing on autonomy versus control in those projects. The matter turns out to be more complicated than you might think. The enthusiasm of the 1990s you referred to was premised on the belief that the World Wide Web is a free space that allows anyone to talk about anything with everyone else, and everyone would be treated equally. Wrong! There are plenty of hierarchies and authorities in the internet. Everything people produce in the web—forum discussions, knowledge bases such as Wikipedia, or operational systems such as Linux—it all has to be controlled in certain ways. Somebody decides who will be a participant and who will not. Somebody judges whether another person's contribution is valuable or not. Somebody has to decide on the rules of caring for that common good.

4 See M. O'Neil, *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*, Pluto Press, London 2009.

O'Neil distinguishes between two types of authority that operate in the management of digital commons. The first one is the charismatic authority, usually legitimized by merits. This includes renowned hackers, originators of IT technologies etc. The key is meritocracy, genius autonomy, but also one's position in the web. The web is not evenly developed. It is not the case that every node has as many connections as any other. There are hubs and supernodes. An individual or organization at such a center will also enjoy an authority of this sort.

The other type of authority that O'Neil found during his research is the *popular sovereignty*. It is possible for a community developing any given project to create formal institutions that create and enforce some rules concerning work around those goods. An example of this can be the netiquette, or a set of rules that specified such details as the maximum number of characters in an email signature. This netiquette used to be enforced by calling one another to order and using a system of penalties and bans that are applied at the discretion of administrators exercising authority. O'Neil says that most immaterial common goods, such as code, knowledge or other types of cultural goods are curated by communities that he calls digital tribes because of their nomadic nature and their fluid boundaries. Take the example of the so-called forking of software. When a large group of programmers who work together under open or free software licenses disagree with the course the project is taking on, they can create a copy, and continue developing it in another way, under a changed name. From that moment on, the project is being developed in two divergent ways and the group goes on developing the software in their preferred direction.

In most groups that work on common goods, both kinds of authority emerge. So if we ask about the level of egalitarianism and democracy in these "tribes", the answer is they are partly successful in that and partly not.

JS: But let us have look at it from a slightly different perspective, that of the efficiency of different models. Let us compare the material and organizational potential of the institutions behind Linux and other operational systems. Mac OS or Windows are manufactured by giant companies belonging to the richest people on the planet. Even if large corporations are engaged in the manufacturing of some Linux distributions, still the resources that Linux developers count with are definitely smaller. The Linux Foundation employs 150 people and has an annual budget of little more than ten million dollars. This is a splash in the ocean when compared to the wealth of Microsoft or Apple. Yet Linux is able to successfully compete with those giants' products. Of course, the argument between respective supporters of those systems is a

well-known and futile ritual, so what I am concerned with is not this kind of comparison, but the relation between material expenditures and the final outcome. In this regard, I believe Linux remains unrivaled. What makes it possible is the fact that the code is transparent so anyone can detect errors and improve the software.

MŚ: For me, it is also a question of where would we be without Linux? It would be a world where we could only choose between Apple, Microsoft and emerging Google projects. I think it is important to measure this success against the reality in which it happened. Texts such as *The dotCommunist Manifesto*, envisioning a great revolution and upheaval, were in fact just literary fancies. Nobody actually believed that within five years from the publication there would be a real revolution that would overthrow capitalism. I often hear laments arising from such expectations, detached from reality. My archenemy Evgeny Morozov is just that kind of critic, always asking, "Where's that big revolution of yours?"

JS: I also think that there is a kind of parasitic relationship between commercial companies and free software. Android or Mac OS are constructed upon free operational systems, i.e. Linux and BSD respectively, and it is parasitic on two levels. First, there is an appropriation of the enthusiasm of a swarm of individual programmers, and secondly, we are dealing with a takeover of public investments in the commons. BSD originated as part of a project run by a public university in USA, and Linux would not be around if Richard Stallman, also working at a public university, had not created the GNU. On a wider plane, these processes are described in Mariana Mazzucato's *Entreprenerurial State*,[5] depicting how an enormous mass of innovations—actually, almost all of them—are created thanks to involvement of the State.

5 See M. Mazzucato, *Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*, London: Anthem Press, 2013.

MK: This matter is crucially important. On the one hand, free software has found a way to exist in business and to create business models. Red Hat participates in creating Linux, but it also sells services such as configuration consultancy, server management etc. On the other hand, we have examples such as Android—without the connection

to a Google shop, a phone equipped with that system would have very limited functionality. You can install pure Android with a bunch of free or open source apps, but then it turns out that without auxiliary Google applications, you cannot even run Tinder.

JS: I would like to come back to a topic that came up earlier and I think it deserves a little more discussion. You mentioned the illusion of "Twitter Revolutions" and the naive vision of social media changing everything. But isn't it true that at some point, it really worked like that? Look at the Arab Spring, the Indignados or the Occupy movement. I totally disagree with referring to them as "Twitter Revolutions", as that denies the agency of the people engaged—the revolutions took place because people, not Twitter or Facebook, made them happen. But within the movements, there was a progressive use of those media, now seen as troll factories and data-grinding machines. What is the problem? Why didn't it go on? Why was it just a stage after which the technologies were altogether coopted by the "dark side of the force"?

MŚ: I ask myself the same question. Maybe they have just played their role. I will cite economist Elinor Ostrom, whose research concerned material commons, which, of course, have somewhat different characteristics from immaterial ones. Common material goods are resources that become exhausted with use, so people sometimes have to compete for them. Immaterial goods, by contrast, are uncompetitive. The same e-book can be read by five or five million people at the same time. Nevertheless, there are many analogies between them, at the level of discussion about common goods.

As Elinor Ostrom discusses the conditions of success in the management of the commons, she names three main issues. The first one is the universal availability of information about a given common good. Looking at the internet, we can see that problems arose. In the beginning, it had not taken on a capitalist character yet; it was a scientific and military project, but there was a common interest for that knowledge to be shared and diffused through other centers. Information was not yet locked away by patents or other intellectual property laws. This included source codes. The situation changed with the takeover of digital production by companies, which

simply followed the capitalist logic (or with a paradigm change in institutions that were formerly driven by a different logic). Information enclosure ensued. A few large companies snapped up these commons between them. They lobby for laws and international agreements that secure their interests, while marginalizing or subjugating us. In this way, we have become "unpaid workers" for social media—and without even the right to inspect the rules that govern us (e.g. Facebook algorithms).

The second quality Ostrom names is social, or democratic management of the commons. There is a thing called *internet governance*, a concept of shared management of the internet. This works in different ways on different levels or layers. The internet is, in part, co-governed by non-governmental organizations, in part by government agencies, and in yet another part—also by businesses. This also reflects the popular trend in the United States to invite businesses to join governing bodies as early as possible, because "it is business that will be implementing those solutions in practice." However, business does not stop at implementing the arrangements of the shared governance, but also begins to influence them. That is how the struggle around DRMs, or systems blocking access to copyrighted works played out. Something went wrong already at that early stage of management.

The third element Ostrom names is the need to meet in person with those who partake of the same common good. This is the most difficult part in the case of the internet. Still, it does work. That the internet goes offline is a touchstone of its success. This can take the form of the Arab Spring or some hackerspaces, places where, among other things, free software is developed. Online activities can also morph into a movement like Occupy Wall Street, whose participants meet in a park and sit in. This, again, can be a touchstone of success, but not all movements of this kind end up successful. This is inevitable. I would not take it as an utter failure that some initiatives have burned out. Rather, I would follow up, as anthropological research, on what became of those people later. Where did they go? We are not in the situation of the perceived failure of the hippie movement as it is portrayed now, with all the hippies gone to work for corporations. It is not that bad yet. But maybe it is just a matter of time before all of us end up like that... (laughs).

JS: Do you think that 2011 was the last moment when that progressive wave of novelties was not yet entirely colonized by private interests and the drive to extract value from web users' activities? Those were, it seems, a different internet and different social media...

MŚ: Yes. I believe that was the moment of struggle and a kind of race between the idea of a free internet and libertarian means of communication on one side, and capitalism aiming to create monopolies or oligopolies on the other. Today we can say that we definitely lost it, on several fronts. As far as social media and other popular services are concerned, we are certainly in the era of monopolies. We are dealing with closed gardens, i.e. services that are fully controlled by their owners, who use technologies to stop us from freely managing the contents we create or buy. Facebook chat users cannot chat with users of another chat service, Google's for instance, although it is the same form of communication. Still, I believe the internet has remained free to an extent, perhaps because it managed to take shape at its "innocent" stage.

JS: Isn't it true that opportunities to cash in on email are limited? Clearly, it is all about spamming, but maybe email has become a less tasty morsel by now?

MŚ: I believe it is because the protocol itself has been set free.

JS: Social media do not have their unique protocols, do they?

MK: They do, in a way. Granted, those networks are using standard protocols such as HTTP, and in this sense they belong to the Web 2.0 paradigm, which sees the web as a platform where users are unfettered in creating content and communicating it through compatible and cooperating systems. However, the companies controlling them attempt to limit the ability of their systems to cooperate with others. It works for them, promoting the accumulation of larger quantities of users, data and contents.

Those limitations take the form of spoiling standards or deliberate technical incompatibilities or impediments. To give you an example, I cannot directly see the events that I said I was going to on Facebook, in my Google calendar or in my phone—I must first enter the website.

Another example: for some time, the Facebook chat supported the popular XMPP protocol (Jabber) so you could send messages to its users via several IM (instant messaging) applications. Unfortunately, the service was suspended in 2015. Shortly afterwards, the company began to promote its own Messenger. The foul here is that I can use my phone's browser to look at my "wall" and see I have got new messages, but the site will not allow me to read them, offering to install an application instead. This functionality work when using a computer, and there is no technical reason why it should not work on the phone, too. Mobile applications are generally examples of "black boxes", even if they primarily use open web protocols. It is impossible to create an alternative for Instagram without digging out and applying a special encryption key from the original app code. Anyway, this would amount to breaching the regulations and you would end up with a ban.

Let us step back to ask what has happened to Facebook. It reminds me of a criticism by Andreas Antonopoulos, a Bitcoin expert. Antonopoulos points out that the web, or communicating agents, can act in a hard-guarantee regime. That is how it was designed at its most basic level. This means that if I send a data package to another node, it will either be delivered or I will be notified that it is not possible. Email works in the same way: I send out a letter and all the servers that participate in the delivery are bound to either pass it on, or send back a notice that it is impossible. This is brutal, because, as human beings, we are not living in a world of hard guarantees, but in one of soft promises. There are some conventions that remain in power. There are some arrangements that cannot be altered, but one can always appeal to a higher-level authority. In email, on the other hand, what is done cannot be undone. It is a brutal system and spam takes advantage of that. As a result, users ran to big providers such as Gmail or Apple, who gave a soft promise that the spam will not be there. In exchange for that promise, the user has to agree to give up full control of what he or she receives. It is not the same free protocol anymore; here, the user enters something that is already enclosed. You can still buy a domain and have your own mail server, but

then you have to deal with being spammed from all sides.

This reminds me of the debate about Bitcoin and blockchain technology in general. Andreas Antonopoulos talks in very similar terms. We have a lot of fears concerning Bitcoin. What kind of currency is it, if we can transfer money to somebody and not be able to undo that? You bought something, but the seller does not dispatch it, then what? There is nobody to turn to, no overarching authority. But we must understand that Bitcoin is not just a currency, but also a program and a protocol. That protocol also enables the creation of programs and it guarantees to run in a distributed network of users, yielding the same predictable results, and nobody will be able to alter the outcome. And it is not a simple program that enables me, for example, to pay for a thing I buy on eBay. I can make a more complicated program where I first make a monetary deposit that will only be paid to the seller when I receive the delivery. In this way, we are creating a sort of external authority that manages the whole process, though in fact it is not external, it is written into the code that processes the purchase.

Antonopoulos is convinced that, in our daily functioning, we are used to soft promises and to having an authority we can call upon. And the authority itself always assures us that without it, there would be utter chaos. Antonopoulos thinks that is a fraud. We can build an autonomy that is not based on any kind of authority. All it takes is a communication system that of itself provides hard guarantees.

JS: In what we said there was much criticism of what failed, and that is fine. Projective thinking—which is the kind that can make up a utopia—and critical thinking are closely related. In fact, we need to practice both at all times. You identified certain turning points when things were taken over by democracy-loathing forces of capital. Now, let us consider possible solutions and alternative models. I would like to ask you about some specific ideas that came to my mind. In April 2018 we hosted a lecture by Paul Mason at Biennale Warszawa; he argued that Facebook should be publicly owned. In his opinion, the social media infrastructure is among the basic organizing infrastructures of society in the same way as

water supply, healthcare, the power grid etc. As we know, all attempts to privatize those services result in declining quality and rising prices. For this reason, the so-called developed countries, except in the United States, are trying to maintain those public infrastructures. He believes the same should be done with social media. I wonder what your opinion is about this particular idea, to make Facebook state-owned or governed by some trans-state public agency.

This has to do with another, more general issue of ownership. Stallman and Moglen understood very well that ownership needs to be secured, namely that mechanisms must be created to make sure that digital goods—algorithms, code, data etc.—remain publicly available, not subject to appropriations or privatization. With what is known as Web 2.0, there was no trace of thinking in these terms, yet exactly the same thing that free licenses preclude with regard to code, should also become impossible when it comes to our data. Instead of working out such mechanisms, everybody enthusiastically rushed to swallow the bait of "being connected."

MŚ: Ideas like Mason's have been around for years. But what if a political party gained the same degree of control over social media as the government today has over public media?

JS: Well, Facebook would be what TVP Info in Poland now (laughter).[6]

MŚ: Exactly, and that is probably not what we need. That is why I should say we would better start by applying tried and tested tools of antimonopoly legislation. There are some processes underway, but it is certainly happening too slowly. In the United States and Europe there are laws preventing the creation of entities that are too large in some area—for instance, in automobile manufacturing—that would be able to take over a vast majority of the market. Then, of course, we are faced with the question of how to delineate a market. To say that Facebook is one of many social networks sounds very different from stating that Facebook is the sole owner of rights to access Facebook. In this case they have a 100% monopoly.

6 After the 2015 elections won by the populist Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, public media in Poland has come under growing control of the government, and has become a tool of partisan propaganda (editor's note).

These kinds of distinctions will be essential. I'd rather adopt the latter perspective. While with email, users of Gmail, o2 or any other provider can freely communicate with one another, Facebook has become a monopolist in its field.

Say we decide to do something about it. Then the question is, what in particular? Anti-monopoly proceedings usually lead to the firm being divided into several smaller ones. Myself, I have always been in favor of as much diversity and plurality as possible. That is why I am not convinced that it is state authorities that should control social media. I would rather like a formula of community inclusion, or co-governance. Users should have the right to influence the system setup. This is the case of Wikipedia, which has a complex management system that allows users to be included at various levels of control. This is crucial.

Attempts are currently being made to include public authorities in the governance of what is happening on the internet, but that is not good news since they are concerned with the protection of 'intellectual property'. There is a proposal to reform the copyright law at the level of an EU directive level imposing the automatic filtering of uploaded contents. Then, if we want to post something on the internet, big platforms will have a duty to run an algorithm that will check whether or not what we are uploading has been copyrighted, and if it has, the platform will not allow the publication of such material. Facebook, as it is today, seems a haven of freedom when compared to what might happen if such filters were introduced. As you see, state authorities have taken this on, but they are approaching it from the worst side possible.

MK: I like this anti-monopoly theme. Indeed, perhaps we might demand open protocols for everything.

JS: The vision is certainly attractive: open protocols for everybody. Such reforms could be presented as aligned with the users' interests and aspirations. We could say that now WhatsApp will be able to talk to, say, Telegram. No more problem of someone being on one, while someone else on the other.

Still, I am afraid there are some structural limitations to how much internet evil can be controlled through anti-

monopoly regulations alone. I once saw the findings of research on the speed of propagation of various kinds of information in social media. It turns out that sensational fake news will always spread more quickly, because more people are likely to reproduce it. Our cognitive system has evolved so as to desire and value novelty. The value doubles when the sensational piece of news departs from everything I know. It may contain some knowledge that is valuable by itself, but it also has some image-related value: here I am, the first person with access to new, and therefore important, information. To demonstrate it, I share it with others. This is why people tend to diffuse this kind of contents with much more intensity than is the case of information that sounds reasonable and consistent with what we already know. One might say this is nothing new, we are dealing with the gossip mechanism; however, technology brings in one more, very significant element: Without digital social media, it would be very hard to carry out campaigns like the one Cambridge Analytica[7] made. In fact, it would be impossible.

MŚ: Once again, we are coming across the problem of transparency. On Facebook, you may be annoyed at your classmate who used to be a cool dude, but now he keeps writing bullshit or spreading fake news. What you do not see is Facebook itself, cashing in on that. I cannot agree with explanations like "human nature" when it comes to certain actions aimed at cash gain. Fake news spreads well on Facebook, because that is what the company is interested in—the more activity ("likes", "shares", arguments), the more page views and more readers are engaged—and the more money can be made from paid posts, advertisements etc.

There is no general awareness of how cynical and unethical are the motives driving such actions. In contrast to projects such as Diaspora,[8] which have an ethical impulse at their roots, Facebook has just one goal and it has nothing to

7 Cambridge Analytica was a British political consultancy firm that, in 2015-16, famously engaged in electoral campaigns of Donald Trump and the pro-Brexit camp (Leave.EU). It used advanced technologies to process data collected from the internet and mobile app users including 87 million users of the application This Is Your Digital Life. In 2017, it turned out that much of the data had been acquired in violation of the Facebook terms of service. In 2018, Cambridge Analytica declared bankruptcy (editor's note).

8 Diaspora is a social portal similar to Facebook but not commercially oriented. Its technology is based on free software, designed to protect the users' privacy (editor's note).

do with the ethical order: simply to generate huge profits for its shareholders.

What is worse, another issue arises: even if we decided to put ethics before profit, which supranational structures would effectively implement such an approach? Apart from the European Union, we have got a human rights system that is very poorly enforceable. Efforts to make those mechanisms work for any meaningful goals have been unsuccessful, as far as the digital domain and internet are concerned. Instead, we have a very fast running machine of constructing a neoliberal style legal skeleton: free trade agreements, WTO restrictive intellectual property laws and so on. Attempts to create barriers to the freedom of internet or to impose oppressive intellectual property regimes can be seen everywhere. Speculating inside our European bubble, we imagine some things are still possible, but everything is being bulldozed by supranational trade treaties. They are trying to commodify the internet much more than we think possible.

MK: It is worth coming back to Moglen. How should we organize our global hive mind, or our collective consciousness? Our thinking increasingly depends on communication that happens instantaneously. Fake news can travel across the whole of society in the course of a single day. Do we want to build such a kind of hive mind in which we are all just drones connected to one central brain? We are creating big central server rooms to organize our information flow. Maybe we should rather invent a system with many more information processing points? Then we could achieve neural network thinking. Each of us is a neuron interested in making connections to others, but we should all be able to control what flows through these connections. Here is a scope for autonomy, for algorithms we have more control over, which will process information coming in from other people. At present, we delegate that task to Facebook.

MŚ: Well, this is disputable, because, based on what we know about networks, they sooner or later develop dominant nodes (hubs) and arteries. Whether we like it or not, social

networks strive not to be non-hierarchical. Whether this is due to our biology or the nature of capitalism, is of secondary importance.

JS: I fear that the "networkization" of networks, so to say, will always lead to data aggregation, which entails the risk of abuse. Our compatriot, Michał Kosiński, who invented the algorithms used by Cambridge Analitica, is a psychologist by profession, but his achievement has little to do with psychology as such. It involves very good operationalization in the network context of certain human psychological traits and phenomena, already well examined and described, plus access to a machine of a sort, namely millions of intensively communicating people. No such thing ever existed previously, because there was no structure for information exchange between two billion people.

MK: OK, but in my opinion, the solution is to stimulate cognitive diversity. You may create big social networks, but the important thing is for the people within them not to be uniformly programmed. Let me ask you what allows an animal or human population to be decimated by a disease?

MŚ: It is when all the potatoes are the same variety.

MK: That is it. All individuals respond in the same way, so the disease decimates the entire population. Fake news works in the same way: everybody uses the same algorithm to analyze information, so if some information is introduced that easily jumps from feed to feed, it spreads like an epidemic. So it is important to have diversified means of processing the information. It must not be one central controller determining the way everybody in a social hub is supposed to analyze information.

JS: I'd like to ask the two of you specifically about one thing that came up earlier in our conversation. It is the blockchain technology and the opportunities it can or cannot offer. I have a feeling that many people see it as another revolution of the Web 2.0 format. Something new has appeared within

the web, offering possibilities that were not there before. You touched on smart contracts, or blockchain-based systems, that allow us to structure a situation conditionally according to the "if A then B" pattern. This operates, for instance, in crowdfunding: we chip in our contributions, but the funds will only be transferred if a certain level is reached; otherwise they will go back to the contributors. There is no problem of trust or distrust—the soft promises vs hard guarantees dilemma you mentioned—the guarantee is in the code. This technology allows us to combine trust and anonymity, which is, I think, a significant novelty: until now, you had to identify and recognize someone before deciding if he or she can be trusted. There are also ideas of creating social media supported by blockchain, which would enable us to own our profile and freely move it over with all our contacts from one platform to another. What are your opinions about that? Is it overly enthusiastic, one more single-season sensation? Or is there something new and promising about that technology?

MK: I am very curious about that technology. What raises issues is the fact that smart contracts can be spoiled. If they are distributed, programs run concurrently on a blockchain in a guaranteed way, they may contain programming errors. This was the case of one kickstarting system: somebody invented a very cunning method of exacting money from other participants. Tons of funds were pumped out in that way. What adds to the problem is that in a distributed system like that, an error cannot be removed in a simple way; the whole network has to be upgraded. All the participants must come to agreement and do it, before the contract starts to work in a new way. This is both difficult and power-consuming, and we know that.

MŚ: To be honest, I don't know enough about it to take a stance, but I am immediately reminded of all the mistakes and problems of the 20th century. They happened right at the times when we thought that machines would outdo human beings, and so put the world on the right tracks. But I firmly believe we have the right to make mistakes, the right to lie. All these

weak spots can create problems in our interactions with other people, but they make us human. We all may sometimes benefit from the situation where it is possible for us to be given a second chance, where not everything is rigidly determined by unchangeable contracts. People do forgive and forget. Any solutions that are inherently and absolutely unforgiving are scary to me. It doesn't come from my knowledge about blockchain, but rather an anthropological prescience of something very unpleasant and dangerous. I have, for example, as problem with the Chinese system of rating people, called Sesame Credit. From a meritocratic perspective it all sounds brilliant: a person is credibly evaluated for actually having crossed at a red light or written an exam poorly. But how about our right to lie to our insurance agency and say that I do not smoke at all? I would never ever like us to lose that right. To me, all those defects of ours are human rights that we should equally fight for. In this sense, giving everything over to science just does not seem right.

JS: Is it a moment when, as Lessig once wrote, there is no more distinction between law and the code? It becomes impossible for you to do certain things. Not that you are punished in any such case, they just become structurally impossible, precluded by the code.

MŚ: Yes, exactly. There is no more room for negotiations. Right now, we can argue against YouTube that we have the right to use a certain piece as a creative quotation. If, instead, all we are dealing with is an algorithm that simply blocks the material, we have lost that chance to negotiate. When I think about the future of humanity in optimistic terms, I guess it will be born from social interactions and negotiations. Elinor Ostrom writes about such systems that they must be open for evolution. They have to carry an ability to constantly change. Such problems are coming to my mind but I do not know enough about blockchain to say more.

JS: There are now very specific proposals to use new IT technologies, including those based on blockchain, in the political process. What I mean is, for instance, liquid democracy developed by the Democracy Earth foundation, or *random-*

sample voting.[9] What do you think about them? To be clear, I have no illusions that "technology will save us all" in the sense that the very fact of new technologies existing necessarily implies some progressive outcome when it comes to the organization of the political process. That would be naive. But on the other hand, the relation between politics and technologies—especially, social communication technologies—is self-evident. Without at least a national daily press, parliamentarism in its modern form would have no way to function, since it is a precondition for the existence of things such as public opinion or general public debate. Obviously, radio, television or the internet can have the same function; when I say daily press, I mean some absolute technological minimum. I think that a similar thing can be said about the possible further democratization of our political systems—we need new technologies to make participation in the political process easy for as wide a group of citizens as possible. So, to make it short, I believe technology by itself does not produce more democracy right away, but if we want more democracy, then instead of only thinking about ideas, we need to get interested in the technological implementations of the more democratic politics. What do you think?

9 See Jan Sowa's 'Introduction' to this book (editor's note).

MK: It is not easy to answer that question without dismissing such projects as mere curiosities, unless you are one of their enthusiastic supporters. The Democracy Earth foundation that you pointed out as an example, states in its manifesto that it is going to create a transnational network of personal sovereignty and to protect human rights thanks to encrypting. To me, this is not even thinking that technology will save us; it is a pure abstraction where the political and the human are projected onto information technologies. To discuss whether liberty in infocapitalism is about cryptography enabling us to communicate in private is to get drawn into a sophistic debate. In this sense, it is not radical, because it does not at all relate to the oppression that we as human beings are subjected to. And yet there is something profoundly mysterious and powerful about the substance called information, and about the technology of process-

ing it mathematically, particularly cryptography. That I can go around the customs clearance with one million zloty (by remembering the key to the cryptocurrency I possess) is testimony to technology being able to empower an individual in the face of control to which it is subjected. We should be creating and democratizing tools that allow people, at least in theory, to oppose computerized authoritarian oppression and to create alternative social structures. But will the algorithmic visions such as carefully designed voting systems, inspire whole societies to think in utopian, radical terms? Right now, the convenient choice of the "best offer" prevails over enthusiasm for the "miracles of technology".

MŚ: Liberal democracy as a political system is certainly in crisis and needs to be changed radically. In particular, what is needed is more participation from the people concerned in the process of making decisions—those in the workplace, school, family, or state and supranational organizations such as EU, the World Bank or WTO, but also those concerning things like climate action agreements, media and banks. So the question is why is this participation presently not big enough, and what can be done to increase it. As far as electoral participation is concerned, research on non-voters shows that their absence is only minimally due to logistic problems—and these are the ones that could be solved by simple technological intervention. Citizens of Poland most often say that they have no one to vote for or that they see no point of voting, because their vote will not change anything. Politicians are, in fact, an unaccountable, alienated group who mostly care for their own needs. So the problem is an absence of legitimacy of the present forms of political representation.

What is missing? Access to essential information, annotated with comments that extract its meanings; the space to hold debates and arrive at a common understanding—physical space and time, but also a "clear head" to engage in such considerations; the development of abilities to discuss and to cooperate, to build mutual trust and respect for differences; some mechanisms of accountability of our representatives that would work better than voting once ev-

ery few years—grassroots-controlled media and an independent judiciary, powerful labor movements, well-organized communities, more powerful human and environmental rights. Each of these processes can be supported by specific technologies — in this, I remain a techno-enthusiast. But technology by itself will not change anything.

As for now, unfortunately, a larger and larger part of the space of freedom that is the internet is subject to enclosure by capital. Cybercorporations are using the same practices as other big companies. They aim at eliminating competition and creating closed monopolies, blocking access to their "content" through technological barriers. They move and scatter their manufacturing sites to weaken the labor movement and exploit their employees (except a narrow elite who are employed at the headquarters) with impunity. They appropriate the commons to extract profits from more and more types of resources that can be exploited (our communication, friendship, sexuality and so on). This is compounded by more or less obscure connections to politics and government. But this does not have to be so—as long as we do not surrender to defeatist visions. Another technology is possible. Even now, we can see it helping in organization and coordination of workers between various branches of Amazon or automotive factories—it facilitates solidarity actions, which are crucial in countering capitalism. And we can create for it a favorable economic law environment through systemic arrangements, by demanding, for example, that software funded using European funds must be free-licensed. A radical change can also come through people who, in spite of the current balance of power, are using existing technology that is open, free, diversified and politically engaged. So... "All technology to the people! For the masses!"

Translated by Artur Kociałkowski

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Solidarity 2.0, or Democracy as a Form of Life

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Edited by: **Jan Sowa**
Substantive editing: **Piotr Grzymisławski, Jan Sowa**
Translations: **Artur Kociałkowski, Paweł Listwan**
Proofreading: **Nick Faulkner**
Transcripts: **Filip Wesołowski**
Desing and typsetting: **Dwa Graphic Design Department Berlin, (Karolina Pietrzyk, Gilbert Schneider and Tobias Wenig)**
Coordination: **Joanna Janiszewska**

ISBN 978-83-950655-9-0

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ISBN 978-83-950655-9-0