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This dialogue continues the debate that was published in issue 6, "Socialism and Ecology," between James O'Connor and Takis Fotopoulos.

Notes on Fotopoulos and O'Connor

Shaun Huston

The "Dialogue on Socialism and Ecology" between Takis Fotopoulos and James O'Connor in *Society and Nature* issue 6 ("Socialism and Ecology") was enjoyable and enlightening because both authors cut directly to the core of critical theoretical and practical issues surrounding strategy and purpose in radical political ecology. However, on two of the more important issues raised in the dialogue, namely the nature of existing political movements and left dogmatism, I believe that the correspondence produced an underdeveloped comparison of perspectives. This inadequacy stems primarily from a lack of direct response by Fotopoulos to the positions and challenges of O'Connor. It is my purpose here to provide — what I hope is a satisfactory critical supplement to Fotopoulos' initial remarks on existing social movements and dogmatism.

James O'Connor makes the argument that existing political movements are directed more toward democratizing state authority than at creating forms of direct democracy, a term which I take to be synonymous with "collective self-management" (as opposed to forms of management that require mediation through intervening institutions such as states and corporations). According to O'Connor, the former enjoys a status as an "imminent" goal with roots in actual political practice, while the latter is an insupportable, if noble, utopian ideal (issue 6, p. 201). There are three basic responses that can be made to O'Connor's position.

The first, and this is the response that Fotopoulos implicitly makes, is to argue that O'Connor uses claims about history, about political "reality," to avoid a debate over the merits of purposes and strategies which he supports. In effect, O'Connor collapses "what is" and "what should be" into a single construct. Consequently, dialogues about what direction radical political movements should take are rendered moot, or, at least, are constrained, because such questions are resolved by the (apparent) limits of history and place. I do not wish to seem entirely uncharitable to

James O'Connor's position. In one sense, his concern about imminence is an important one, for there is no use in talking about a movement which exhibits no motion. However, his philosophy has an inherently conservative logic to it. This is not always problematic, but it can be when and if claims about political reality are imposed as a limitation on political imaginations. The "imperative of the possible" is the argument employed by mainstream environmentalists to justify legislative deals which accept risk analysis over the elimination of harm, recycling over reductions in consumption and production, and so forth. The fact that James O'Connor's sense of what is practical lies more at the level of social structures than at the level of specific acts of policy making is beside the point. The logic of the position, because it is contingent on interpretations of political reality, supports any number of limitations on the debate concerning political ends. I will return to this matter of imminence at the conclusion of these remarks on contemporary political movements.

The second response that can be made to O'Connor's position on the nature of existing political movements is to accept his challenge to "show [him] plausible movements and struggles, with political goals of direct democracy, within urban movements, peace movements, environmental movements" (p. 201, emphasis in original). Except for referring O'Connor to an article on urban democracy movements in Los Angeles and Latin America from *Society and Nature*, issue 1, by John Friedmann ("The Right to the City" in "The Polis and Self-Management Today"), Fotopoulos forgoes this option. This is unfortunate because, globally, there are a number of political projects directed at fostering practices of self-management rather than democratizing state authority. In Europe and North America, at least six examples of such projects, each tied to some combination of ecological, urban, and housing movements, come immediately to mind. Each of these projects is widespread in the sense that examples can be found across Europe and North America, accessible in terms of availability of information and experience, and eminently practical insofar as there exist nongovemmental organizations that provide advice, technical support, and sometimes financial assistance for those interested in participating in such efforts.

The six examples I have in mind are *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA),* whereby urban-based "subscribers" make an investment in a farmer's operation in exchange for the direct provision of produce (many CSA projects also bring urban subscribers directly into the act of farming); *moneyless exchange networks*, which bring people together for the exchange of services without use of currency or state social service agencies; *Community Land Trusts*, which transform land from being

state or private property into truly public property by placing municipal and rural land into trust for rent or distribution to citizens as deemed socially and ecologically necessary by a community; *cohousing projects*, which combine private residences with extensive common facilities; *Local Exchange Trading Systems*, which involve the use of local currencies backed by local businesses and commodities so that local people left out of state and global economies can acquire goods and services; and *the seizure of public_housing projects by residents*. These projects are all aimed at carving out areas of social life where people can exercise self-management over their lives instead of relying on state, and corporate, authority for social and material survival. To be sure, there are state regulations that these projects must often deal with to avoid being shut down, but using official channels for sanction out of administrative necessity is hardly equivalent to actively pushing state authority toward greater democracy. For examples outside of Europe and North America, I suggest that James O'Connor re-read Friedmann's article without casually dismissing his conclusions as "romantic" (p. 212), as well as similar writings by Colin Ward on the subject of "self-help" cities in post-World War II Britain and the contemporary "Third World."[1] Beyond these readings, Latin American-based communities, the Grameen Bank, and altemative trade organizations all seem to be examples of direct democracy outside of Europe. Furthermore, given that O'Connor acknowledges that direct democracy is a laudable goal, his claim that it is meaningless outside of Europe (p. 201) veers dangerously close to stereotypes of "Third World" peoples as inherently less democratic than Europeans. Such notions not only perpetuate myths about European superiority, but also assume that state structures, a definite product of Europe and European colonialism, are somehow more authentic to the rest of the world than democratic traditions. The examples that I have cited here cut against this notion.

It is possible, and this is the third response, to accept O'Connor's claims about the nature of existing political movements without conceding to him his interpretation of what sort of change is imminent in those movements. Take, for example, one of his favorite causes, the democratization of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It seems to me that the imminent purpose in such a movement would not be the creation of a representational decision-making structure for the IMF, but the establishment of control over the IMF by those people whom that organization is supposed to be serving. A form of representative governance may be one manifestation of this purpose, but the creation of mechanisms for direct participation

[1] See *Talking Houses: Ten Lectures by Colin Ward* (London: Freedom Press, 1990), especially pp. 15-35 and pp. 99-112.

in decision making is another possible manifestation, one that more fully realizes the imminent democratic purpose of the movement. Peter Kropotkin provides another example of this sort of reasoning. Kropotkin found in the state provision of roads, museums, libraries, and the like the social basis for anarchist communism. That is, even though nation-states were, at a given time and place, fully capable of providing public services, the principle embedded in the provision "to each according to his or her needs" implies a social order contrary to the hierarchical and competitive one represented by the constitution of state authority.[2] For Kropotkin, as it should be for us today, existing political structures and institutions are not the logical or necessary ends of social change processes. As O'Connor notes himself, political movements need not be fully conscious of the ends they represent for such ends to be valid (p. 201). Fotopoulos makes a line of argument similar to mine when he develops the position that social change is a staged process wherein democratization of state authority may be one passage on the way to further democratization of social life (p. 193), but he does not directly question.

O'Connor's reasoning about imminence and allows himself to be beat over the head with the stick of empiricism. Significantly, the argument that Fotopoulos elaborates which O'Connor does not adequately answer is the notion that there is a logic to state-centered politics which inexorably transforms radical movements into platforms for ambitious individuals or de-radicalized lobbying groups engaged in legislative bargaining with hegemonic interests. O'Connor's only response to this claim is to state that such tendencies "must be fought" (p. 207). Given the record of movements that have accommodated themselves to the "practical realities" of state authority, such as the German Greens, the US civil rights movement, and the British New Town movement, a response to the problems of co-optation and de-radicalization that moves beyond simple recognition is necessary for O'Connor's interpretation of valid purposes and strategies to be compelling. The difficulty of O'Connor's position is compounded by his support of direct democracy within radical political movements, a move which brings the means and ends of a movement into direct contradiction. O'Connor provides no insight as to how this contradiction might be transcended.

The second issue raised in the dialogue that merits additional comment is the issue of left dogmatism. O'Connor makes the case that Society and Nature's mission statement, "Our Aims," is an example of dogmatic "Bookchinist" social ecology. I believe that Fotopoulos does a credible job of defending "Our Aims" on both a

[2] See Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of bread* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), pp. 32-33.

substantive level and as a document which represents an expression of aspiration that does not necessarily preclude particular strategic alternatives. Fotopoulos does not, however, challenge O'Connor's claim to the non-sectarian high ground. More to the point, both authors are so concerned with avoiding even the appearance of dogmatism that neither explores the necessary dialectic between openness and closure that political commitment engenders. On the one hand, openness to internal and external criticism is necessary to avoid stagnation and irrelevance. On the other hand, uncritical openness to all possible purposes and strategies can be paralysing, in the sense that commitment to everything, in all times and all places, is ultimately the same as commitment to nothing. Documents such as Society and Nature's "Our Aims" are necessary moments of definition, not unlike O'Connor's definition of himself as a "Polanyist-Marxist" (p. 182), which enable political movements and projects to take form. Laying down such statements does not, or should not, necessarily preclude revision and adaptation to changing conditions and needs. The fact that O'Connor places himself on an explicitly "redgreen" continuum indicates that his commitment to "pluralism" (p. 187) has limits and that he probably would not object strenuously to my interpretation of the nature of political commitment. However, both he and Fotopoulos are so concerned with dodging charges of dogmatism, and with appearing to be inclusive of the whole left, that there is no attempt to accept closure even as a transitory, yet necessary, move. Ironically, by staking claims to inclusiveness while simultaneously advancing distinct democratic political projects, Fotopoulos and O'Connor deny legitimacy to (or the truth of) differences which exist between "red-green" philosophies, differences which make political ecology a vital and relevant source of theory and practice for radical political movements.

I hope that this response has added to the original dialogue in a way that clarifies and elaborates on the initial arguments. It is important for those committed to a radical political ecology to engage in discussions such as O'Connor's and Fotopoulos' that openly share sincere differences about theory and practice without resorting to staged controversy or close-mindedness. It is equally important that difference, even when it precludes direct cooperation or agreement, not be treated as a deficiency or problem that must be immediately overcome. Rather, difference between radical tendencies generates reflection and criticism, which keeps us all from "stewing in our own juices".

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Notes on Fotopoulos and O'Connor: A reply

Takis Fotopoulos

Shaun Huston's very useful comments on my exchange with James O'Connor, although aimed to provide "a satisfactory critical supplement" to my remarks on existing social movements, in fact, highlighted some aspects of the issues involved, which — as far as I am concerned, were deliberately left out of the debate.

Huston's argument about the adequacy of my challenge to O'Connor's position on social movements depends on a crucial assumption: that O'Connor challenged me about the lack of "political projects directed at fostering practices of self-management" — an assumption that gives him the opportunity to go on and describe examples of several projects that I could have mentioned to save myself from the risk of being "beaten over the head with the stick of empiricism". But, in fact, O'Connor challenged me to show "plausible movements and struggles, with POLITICAL GOALS (his emphasis) of direct democracy" (p. 201), which is an altogether different proposition. It is clear that, however important the examples of movements mentioned by Huston, they certainly do not belong to the type of movement meant by O'Connor. Thus, it is obvious that these projects aim, as rightly Huston points out — explicitly, or more often implicitly — at what he describes as a process of "carving out areas of social life where people can exercise self-management over their lives instead of relying on state and corporate authority for social and material survival." However, it is equally obvious to anyone familiar with these projects that they surely do not aim at a new political goal, that is. a new social project that involves the replacement of the present institutional framework, founded on state power and the market economy, with a new institutional framework based on direct democratic (political and economic) structures. Unlike the New Left movement and the radical currents within the student movement in the 1960s, and the radical trends within the Green movement in the 1970s and the 1980s, which explicitly aimed at a new social project, the projects mentioned by Huston take for granted the state and market structures and not infrequently, as O'Connor mentions, rely on them. By this, I do not just mean that they "use official channels for sanction out of administrative necessity" — as Huston describes these projects — but that none of them is an integral part of a coherent political project to change the political and economic structure of present society along democratic lines. Still, unless such

projects are integrated within a coherent project of social change, like the Confederal Municipalism project, I seriously doubt whether they can be characterised as movements aiming (even implicitly) at a new form of social organisation based on direct and economic democracy. It is on these grounds, therefore, that I deliberately did not refer to such projects and instead I preferred to refer to the New Left and the radical Green movements — something that Huston does not mention at all.

Having said that, it would be a serious misunderstanding, as Huston correctly stresses, to describe these projects as just aiming at the democratization of the state-a description O'Connor would be more than happy to adopt. To my mind, one could perhaps better categorise them as projects that, potentially, represent a transitional phase in the development of new democratic social movements, or movements aiming at social and individual autonomy. It is precisely their potential to create alternative and more radical forms of consciousness, especially among the participants that makes these projects significant.

O'Connor's charge about the "lack of imminence" is, of course, a serious charge when raised against any social project that aims to be something more than just a noble, utopian ideal. Although I think that in my reply to O'Connor I did respond to this charge, at least implicitly, I would like here to make my response more explicit. For me, the issue is how we define "imminence." If we define it in a narrow short-termist way, as O'Connor does, in terms of the number of examples of struggles for direct and economic democracy versus the number of movements aiming at democratising the state, then he is obviously right that the latter involve a much greater number of actual movements than the former. This is so, however, provided — as I pointed out in my exchange with him — that we include in the movements to democratise the state every statist movement around, from the "civil-societarians," the communitarians, the green "realos" etc. up to the reformed social-democrats (or, better, social-liberals). If on the other hand we define imminence in a broad historical sense, i.e. in terms of long-term historical trends, there is no doubt — as I mentioned in my response to O'Connor — that the most important structural trend today is the historical shift away from statism. This shift is expressed at the political level by the collapse of the social democratic consensus and the rise of the neoliberal consensus and at the economic level by the internationalisation of the economy, which deprives the nation-state of most of its economic power (see my articles in S&N nos 5-6). In this sense, O'Connor's strategy to "democratise the state" is both a-historical and utopian and, therefore, completely lacking in any imminence. In other words, the real political issue today is not the pseudo-dilemma "democratic" vs non-

democratic statism, but how the current historical shift away from statism — which at present is channelled into new forms of concentration of power based on a network of city-regional governments and transnational companies — will be directed instead into new democratic political and economic structures, which presuppose no power structures and relations.

Finally, Huston asserts that I did not challenge O'Connor's claim to the non-sectarian high ground and that both O'Connor and I were "so concerned with avoiding even the appearance of dogmatism ...that there is no attempt to accept closure even as a transitory, yet necessary move." Although I would agree that I could perhaps challenge O'Connor more about his supposed non-sectarianism, I think that the second part of the criticism does not stand up to the facts. In fact, it is rather contradictory that whereas I am credited with an effective defending of the statement "Our Aims," which is characterised by Huston as a "necessary moment of definition," I am then criticised for not attempting to accept closure. Furthermore, the fact that my response did accept closure becomes obvious by such statements as the following one (p. 193): "it is only within the context of the abolition of all types of hierarchical structures (including the State) and the creation of conditions of individual and collective autonomy that we can meaningfully talk about a liberatory project. OUR AIMS exactly sets this ultimate objective in order to define the liberatory project. For us, therefore, this does not represent a 'tendency' among others but the very content of this project."

Still, despite my serious reservations about Huston's response, I do believe it is a significant contribution to the dialogue, not least because it highlights some mute points from the original exchange that obviously needed clarification.

Links:

http://www.democracynature.org/vol3/huston_dialogue_1.htm

http://www.democracynature.org/vol3/fotopoulos_dialogue_1.htm