

City & Ecology

Dialogues with
Brian Tokar and Dimitris Roussopoulos



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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	6
<i>City, energy & climate change</i>	9
<i>Libertarian municipalism, reclamation of ground & the victorious history of the democratic Milton Parc</i>	34

Introduction

On 25-27 October 2019, in the city of Athens, a very important conference took place, organized by TRISE (Transnational Institute of Social Ecology). The main theme of the conference was the creation of a culture of resistance towards a radical social change, and during the conference more than 30 speakers from 17 different countries gathered. Among them were Brian Tokar and Dimitris Roussopoulos - two influential figures from the North American social ecology movement. We, the editorial team of Aftoleksi, had the opportunity to conduct two separate dialogues with each one of them on some critical contemporary issues through the lens of social ecology - a theoretical instrument that focuses on the direct relationship that the political organization of society has with our attitudes toward nature.

With Brian Tokar, we had the opportunity to address planet-wide issues involving transnational planning and the macro-social view of our symbiosis on the planet. Issues concerning climate change and energy management; the type and manner of energy self-sufficiency we need; the 'return' of the nuclear threat; the dependence of dominant forms of energy exploitation on the imaginary of economic growth and the way this has been imposed as a means of concentrating political and social power and bureaucratic control over populations. We discuss the urgency of the project of social ecology and direct democracy in the current situation that brings us face to face with the specter of ecological and social destruction under the chariot of neoliberalism. In our own historical era, the character of urgency is appropriate as global warming

is now an inescapable horizon. In the face of catastrophe, the concept of climate justice, introduced by Tokar himself, is more relevant than ever.

But the global is inherent in the local, as the consequences of the crisis itself in all fields demonstrate, and both social injustice and social struggle are rooted in locality and in the structures of everyday life. Thus, Dimitris Roussopoulos comes to emphasize the importance of the city and the neighborhood as a field of coexistence and struggle, the centrality of the everyday problems of ordinary people and the possibility of building networks of solidarity and direct democracy in the urban fabric, recreating the free public space. While the real estate capital together with the state agencies proceed with the privatization of public space and the reconfiguration of the urban landscape into a landscape of consumption of tourist attractions and commodities, society is squeezed on the fronts of constant struggles of reclamation, resistance and reconstruction. The problems and conflicts that erupt in the urban environment are the other side of the problems that emerge in the natural environment. The common denominator is social ecology and direct democracy, as forms of social coexistence and political institution that emerge amidst struggles for decentralization of power, practical questioning of the imaginary of property, cooperative management of production and horizontal, democratic institutions of self-government. For those forms of life, in other words, that constitute an explicit questioning of institutionalized authority and are on a collision course with the established capitalist and statecraft imaginary. Roussopoulos' long experience, from the self-managed neighborhood of Milton Parc in Montreal and the projects of libertarian municipalism, is a historical legacy for urban movements of social and individual autonomy.

The result of these dialogues is the book you hold in your hands, made all the more relevant by recent global developments. The fires now plaguing the entire planet, the Amazon, California, Siberia and even more dramatically Australia, come to show that the consequences of global warming have become a reality and are beginning to affect humanity here and now.

Moreover, social movements in cities all over the world are trying to create real public spaces, free from capitalist exploitation and state control. Thus, the perspective of democratic and ecological cities has come to the fore once again.

Such a perspective becomes even more urgent after the global pandemic of SARS-Cov-2, which highlighted the limits and gaps in the established system of managing the natural and social environment and regulating life. The values of solidarity, humanism and equality, which have been so necessary to maintain the cohesion of societies in the midst of a pandemic, are in head-on conflict with the values of economism and profitability that govern the functioning of the state and the market. The failure of state mechanisms to act rationally and coherently in the face of the coronavirus, which became more visible in the powerful states of the West, also made the decline of the dominant paradigm more evident. But the horizon of social ecology and direct democracy seems to us the only alternative to a reinforced statism leading to ecofascism. We believe that the dialogues in this volume outline this horizon.

Finally, we have undertaken this project as we firmly believe that the ecological and urban questions are of vital importance for the present and future of our presence on the planet. We have chosen to talk to these thinkers, who have been warning for decades about the destructive direction of our societies, proposing a radical way out towards a direct-democratic and ecological society.

City, energy & climate change

A dialogue between Brian Tokar, Yavor Tarinski, Ioanna Maravelidi and Peter Piperkov

Yavor Tarinski: We have the great pleasure of having you Brian here with us in Athens, together with all these bright people, during the days of TRISE's 5th conference. You are a very important figure in North America's social ecologist movement and you have been active since the '70s. You have been observing the movement from its anti-nuclear stage until its more recent climate justice period. You got the opportunity to work with people like Murray Bookchin, while you yourself have published influential books and articles. And I think it is a great opportunity that we are having this dialogue today since climate change is something that will be experienced by everyone. The injustice is that some are already experiencing the consequences of climate change for close to two decades, while there are others who are just beginning to feel its effects or will do so in the following few years. But everyone sooner or later will have to face it.

Brian Tokar: I think that in the last year or two it has become clear to anybody who's paying attention that the climate crisis is affecting everybody now.

Whether it's subtle disruptions in the weather during the growing season, or more frequently the case of increasingly unstable and extreme weather in every part of the world. But there are places in the world, especially in the Global South, that have been experiencing this for about ten or twenty years. There's data from the early 2000s showing that even at that time the frequency of exposure to extreme weather events for people in the Global South was many times higher than for people in the North. So, we had the luxury in Europe and North America until maybe a year or two ago of pretending that climate change is a problem for the indefinite future. I don't think very many people who are thinking about what's happening around them believe that anymore.

YT: We see that the question of climate change has infiltrated the public discourse in North America, Europe and North Asia. Even politicians and business representatives have begun speaking of climate change as a problem, which must be tackled. But how would you comment on the sincerity of their intentions and how do you think their proposals correlate with the strategies developed by the ecological movement all these years.

BT: The climate crisis is really a crisis of capitalism. Capitalism from its inception was dependent upon the rise of fossil fuels. The existence of massive quantities of cheap fossil fuel energy is really what drove the capitalist myth that the economy can continue to grow perpetually. We know that Murray Bookchin was really the first person to point out that there is a fundamental conflict between the capitalist myth of endless growth and the living ecosystems of the Earth that we depend on. And this is common knowledge now among

people in the climate movement who have a radical understanding. Of course, as you said, there are many capitalist interests and mainstream politicians who claim to be trying to do something about the climate situation. I think that some of them are sincere to a degree, like some politicians in the 1960s and the '70s sincerely wanted to do something about pollution because the magnitude of the problem was so extreme. But they will not take anywhere near the measures that are necessary to address the full seriousness of the problem unless there is much more pressure on them. What we get from the green capitalists is the idea that we can convert to renewable energy but the economy will continue to grow, investment will continue to grow, the financial institutions will continue to be wealthy. And the model of renewable energy development that is coming from those interests is one that is almost as unsustainable as the perpetuation of the fossil fuel economy.

Ioanna Maravelidi: You mentioned that the capitalist system is fundamentally supportive of the myth of endless growth, and as we have here two friends and comrades from Bulgaria, I would like to ask whether you think that there was a similar logic in the Soviet Union and the supposedly different model of state socialism. There they also spoke of endless growth and were embedded in the same capitalist narrative even though they pretended to be anticapitalist. So, what do you think about it?

Peter Piperkov: I basically think that it is more correct to label this system, of the Soviet Union and its satellites, state capitalism. It had the same capitalist drive of perpetual growth and industrialization. The only difference is that there was only one single capitalist and it was the state. But the whole logic

was more or less the same. It ended with tons of problems, which are still present in post-Soviet countries with their heavy industrialization, with all the pollution, with all the factories that are really close to big cities. So, I don't think there is such a huge difference between these two "different" systems.

BT: I agree and think that the leaders of the Soviet system decided very early on that their goal was to rapidly industrialize the economy and to compete with the capitalist countries. And they did that by adopting many of the same economic methods. So, I completely agree that it was a state capitalist system and not socialist in any meaningful way.

YT: You mentioned the dependence of capitalism on fossil fuels and oil-based energy. Can you elaborate further on that?

BT: There are probably two sources I rely on that have analyzed this in most detail. One is a series of papers from the UK by a research group called The Corner House that looks at the origins of capitalist ideology and its parallel development with the emergence of the coal economy. The other is a work by Swedish writer named Andreas Malm with whom you might be familiar with. His work is fairly popular now. In his book "Fossil Capital" he looks at the question of why the owners of the British textile industry switched from water power to coal. And the typical capitalist ideological explanation is that there was a problem of scarcity, there was a lack of efficiency, there was a problem with profitability. He shows that none of those conditions apply. There was plenty of water power and plenty of additional places where they could have built water mills. The early coal engines were extremely inefficient and costly.

They broke down more often and were much less reliable. But the conversion from hydropower to coal power optimized the ability of the textile industry owners to control their labor force. Because when they were building their factories along the run of the waterways in the countryside they were employing people who had a sense of self-reliance in communities that were tied to the land, who had certain independence in their livelihoods and when conditions got to be really terrible in the textile mills they would just quit *en masse* and go back to working mostly in agriculture. What coal power did was enable them to move factories to the city where they had a captive labor force. Malm shows with tremendous detail how during the period from the 1820s to the 1850s, the textile industry, which was of course the main driving force of industrialization in England and ultimately in Europe as a whole, was driven by questions of increasing the desired control over labor. It was the use of coal power that really did that.

PP: And also, we can add here this whole process of enclosures of common land, which kind of destroyed the rural communities and helped capitalists to be able to displace people more easily to big cities.

BT: Yeah, that's from where this captive labor force came from. From people who had been relatively recently displaced from their land by force.

YT: Let's talk here about the fact that coal as an energy source was so useful to this capitalist class because it requires a certain bureaucratic machinery in need of centralized management, which makes the labor force easily supervised and manageable.

BT: And then, once they had completed that process of shifting the location of most industry to the city then they were able to impose work around the clock, no longer dependent on ebbs and flows of the rivers as they once were, no more seasonal dependence. It was only then that steam power driven by coal finally became more productive than water power. At that point the pace and scale of production was able to grow at a rapid, exponential rate during the second half of the 19th century, which really brought us the beginning of the capitalism we are familiar with today that acts as if there truly are no limits to its capacity to expand.

PP: This also happened in Bulgaria during the years of the Bolshevik regime with all the displacement of people from rural land to big cities in the process of industrialization. So, the pattern is more or less the same although in different time periods.

BT: And now it's happening in Greece, where half the population of the country lives in Athens and the displacement of the people from the land, as I understand, has happened in just a generation or two.

PP: A similar process is also happening now in China...

BT: Absolutely! In China they are building new cities with the expectation of finding people to live in them.

YT: This comes in a clash with a huge swath of the Left, which still has a modernist fascination with large scales. There is talk, for example, of nuclear energy. I think that the problem of scale has to do with that. As we see, the

necessarily large scale required by coal or oil, implying a bureaucratic state-like formation to manage the labor force, is very similar with the case of nuclear energy.

BT: Its even much more extreme...

YT: Yes! We can see this fascination in the ex-Soviet bloc, where the bureaucrats and the commissars were very impressed by nuclear power. Do you think that such an energy source can be compatible with a democratic society?

BT: Nuclear power is absolutely incompatible with a democratic society. It has always been an extension of the nuclear weapons complex controlled by the military. In my opinion based on my personal observation of the evolution of that technology in the US since the 1970s, but also understanding its history from back in the fifties where the nuclear power system and the nuclear weapons system have never been separated. They have one set of institutions for training technicians, they have a flow of expertise and a skilled labor force that goes back and forth, and you cannot have nuclear power other than a bureaucratic and also extremely militarized society.

The hazards of nuclear power also in some ways demand the kind of militarization that the structures of nuclear power have always operated under. You need high levels of security because you are dealing with extremely toxic radioactive materials. They have to be stored for not hundreds, not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of years in some cases. And of course, they still haven't figured out a way to do that and most likely never will.

Nuclear power doesn't exist anywhere in the world without extremely high levels of forced public subsidy whether through the state or through private utility companies that are allowed to bill their customers ahead of time for construction costs that double and triple and quadruple over the course of time that it takes to build a nuclear power plant. If we had some fantasy free market, there is no way that nuclear power could function because it will go bankrupt immediately.

People point to France: how is it that the French get such a high proportion of their electricity from nuclear power and they haven't had the kinds of problems that we see in the Soviet Union or the US nuclear accidents? And the answer is that the nuclear industry in France was a direct extension of the military. It didn't function as part of the civilian economy really at all. As soon as the French military lost interest in managing the electricity supply with nuclear power, the French stopped building nuclear power plants as well and, like the rest of Europe, they're now debating how quickly to shut them down. They tried building a French nuclear power plant in Finland a few years ago and by the time the cost reached several times the originally estimated cost to build it, my understanding is that they gave up on that project as well. So, the so-called French model of nuclear power is in no way exportable and no longer really functions the way it once did in France.

YT: We see this pattern here that Brian and Peter spoke about, regarding the coal industry and the types of energy sources where you need to uproot people from their communities and bring them to alienating urban sprawling monstrosities. And we have seen that nuclear energy requires the creation of

completely artificial cities like the one in Chernobyl for example. There was the need for an artificial city to be created and filled with uprooted people. But by being uprooted from their organic communities, these people are placed in a predetermined precarious position because in this way they become completely dependent on the functioning of the nuclear power plant. And the moment you close it, these cities become ghost towns because there is no longer a reason for them to exist. So, we see the social consequences of such centralized manners of energy production and how they degrade human relations.

BT: And of course, the question of scale applies to renewable energy as well. I think a lot of major corporations have decided that the only way they can profit from solar and wind power is to build it on a massive scale, comparable to the scale of the fossil fuel development. This is causing its own ecological problems in the places where these mega-scale projects, especially wind projects, are being developed. I heard of one that is being fought here in Greece. I know of another in Mexico, on the Oaxaca coast, which is one of the windiest places in the world. Indigenous lands are being taken over by corporations to build massive wind projects. That's not the kind of renewable energy that we have been talking about since the 1970s in social ecology. And it is certainly not the kind of renewable energy that has the potential to facilitate the kinds of directly democratic control over resources, the economy and our way of life, that we know are necessary for moving forward and thriving as humans in the future.

IM: The example you gave with the indigenous communities was very good. It relates with something I wanted to ask about from the start. We see for decades now that indigenous people are fighting for their land and are entering ecological struggles. There was for example the movement NoDAPL in North Dakota, or the Zapatistas who also are an indigenous movement that has been building its own autonomy for over 25 years. What has social ecology got to say about indigenous movements? I think there is a democratic and radical seed in indigenous communities. How can we, people from urban areas, collaborate with them towards the realization of an ecological society? How is it that the indigenous people are at the forefront of contemporary environmental struggles?

BT: In the early decades of the Institute of Social Ecology we had very close relationship with a number of indigenous communities. Especially the Akwesasne Mohawk community, which was just across Lake Champlain in Northern New York State, and back in the late 1970s and early '80s, when I was just getting involved with the Institute, it was under siege. They were having their supplies cut off by the police forces from New York State and the Institute was involved in organizing support for them. Some of their most brilliant writers and thinkers were coming and presenting at the Institute on regular basis. What we learned was that the principles of their culture and the principles their communities are founded upon are very much the same as the principles that Murray Bookchin discovered in his research on preliterate cultures. His studies of the radical developments in anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s showed that preliterate cultures in many parts of the world lived

according to principles of cooperation, mutual aid and what Murray called complementarity – the idea that we know there are differences among people but it is fundamentally the responsibility of the community to support people and compensate for differences. That people are entitled to their irreducible minimum of the basic means of existence and that the community provides that. The patterns of competition, aggression and so many of the other social problems that we are plagued with today were constantly challenged by a value system that was rooted in a much more cooperative ethics. So indigenous communities that are thriving or in some cases struggling to survive in many places around the world today for the most part are trying to continue to live by those principles.

Many indigenous communities play a central role in the movement for climate justice that I am a part of. When I lecture on climate justice I always point out that the three main elements that have come together to create this movement begin with indigenous and other land-based people's movements in the Global South. Secondly, we have the various environmental justice movements that have emerged in response to environmental pollution in marginalized communities. Mostly in North America but also in Europe and many other places. The notion of an environmentalism of the poor and dispossessed. This was articulated by the Argentine economist Joan Martinez-Alier and some of his writings during the tide of the global justice movement in the late 90s and early 2000s. Also, the so called "Anti-globalization movement," although we prefer to call it the Global Justice movement or as the French term is – "Altermondialisme" or "Alterglobalization", because in

French it leads right to the concept of “Another World is Possible”. In English though it does not sound too great, it’s a little awkward, but we sometimes use it anyway. (*Laughs*) And that’s the third main element – some of the surviving tendencies that emerged from work against the major international financial institutions in the late ‘90s and the early 2000s that were really the beginning of the whole current wave of anti-capitalist movements around the world. And next month in the US we will be celebrating the 20th anniversary of the big demonstrations in Seattle, which succeeded in shutting down the World Trade Organization’s ministerial meeting. For many of the institutions of direct democracy, affinity groups, spokescouncils and horizontalist organization that we pioneered in the anti-nuclear movement in the 1970s, it was really the movements against the WTO, the World Bank and IMF that revived those patterns, those forms of organization and brought them into the movements that are continuing today.

YT: I would like to say here that what you are describing in a way comes to show the real nature of what the capitalists and authoritarian socialists alike call economic growth. It is not by chance that indigenous people around the world are at the forefront of the struggles against this growth. Because what they actually refer to as economic growth, as we have seen in practice, is the incorporation of commons into the market economy, or in other words, the commodification of commons. Because when we speak of the commons, as Elinor Ostrom has masterfully demonstrated in her Nobel Prize work, we speak of communities who successfully manage collectively resources. They have managed through horizontal institutions to establish norms and laws, which to

protect their common fisheries, forests etc. and in effect to prevent them from being harmed and keep them sustainable for long periods of time. To use a term from Cornelius Castoriadis, such communities self-limit their activities in order to avoid the supposed “tragedy of the commons”. What we see in reality is capitalist progress saying “we need to take these resources away from you, submit them to a completely different mode of management, then sell them back to you in the form of commodities, and ultimately impose upon you entirely unsustainable and precarious way of life”. In this line of thought it is not just by chance that the indigenous people are at the frontline as they are the first to show the limits of growth. Economic growth is all about making life increasingly precarious and environmentally degrading.

BT: Yes, absolutely. And in the US it is even more extreme because many of the places that are currently under pressure for large scale resource extraction are places that our indigenous nations were moved to because they were places where people of European descent originally didn’t want to settle. They were seen as fewer desirable places to go – in the desert, in the dry mountains of the West, in remote areas. But these are the places the capitalists are now after because they have discovered that are very rich in minerals, petroleum, and other resources they are interested in. Of course, I say now but I am referring to the last 30 or 40 years. It is absolutely a clash between ancient commons regimes and the limitless growth of capitalism.

PP: It’s a constant process of enclosure. The methods are the same, the goals are the same. What we discussed earlier regarding the early phases of enclosure and the switch from using hydroenergy to using coal. The difference

is that capitalism already did it with the most valuable and profitable places and now it is going for the less desirable ones because there is nothing left...

BT: And these are the places that require the most extreme forms of extraction in order to get the resources out. It used to be easy to get oil out of the ground. When they discovered oil in Pennsylvania in the late 19th century they would literally dig a hole and oil would just come gushing out. Now it requires massive implementation of technology, and the latest form of extraction technology is of course fracking, in order to crack the bedrock and get the oil out that was not available through traditional deep underground oil wells. These new techniques are even more damaging to the land and the water than conventional forms of extraction and they are less profitable. A hundred years ago they were getting hundred units of energy out for every unit of energy they put into the fossil fuel economy. Now it is a tenth of that or less.

PP: From capitalist point of view it's totally not profitable and will be continue getting even less profitable to continue on that road. But I think there cannot be change in this within capitalism, because in order to realize that it's getting less and less profitable, you also need to question the whole idea of constant growth. And this is the very backbone of capitalism so...

BT: Yes, and Andreas Malm in his book actually makes this argument about renewable energy - that the reason only the most massive scale of renewable energy facilities are profitable in capitalist terms is because the technology is getting cheaper and more affordable at increasingly rapid pace. Which is a good thing. But from a capitalist point of view that means that the monetary

value of their capital assets is declining rather than increasing or remaining stable. And they don't have the need to continue extracting fuel and keep making money from that. So renewable energy implemented in the kind of democratic and decentralized way that we have been advocating in social ecology for the last 40 years is something that capitalists will never be seriously interested in. They will always look for ways to do it that replicate the ways of the old system. That is something we need to be very aware of and many traditional environmentalists who see that the future is in solar and wind, which it is, are willing to overlook that. And that's a serious problem too.

YT: For social ecologists direct democracy is more than just to sit in an assembly. It is actually a new civilizational model. We see this in the works of Murray Bookchin and what he called libertarian municipalism, which helped in its turn the development of the project of democratic confederalism in Rojava.

There is this radical difference in scales. There are the green capitalists who suggest that we should concentrate on changing our personal consumption patterns and lifestyle, you know the usual "use less plastic", "buy more green products" or "drink only fair-trade coffee", as a means of achieving the needed change. But even this logic seems irrational when implied to the current system of unlimited growth, which will cut all the bamboo in the world if it finds a market niche for bamboo straws. Then there is the modernist Left, which claims that there is nothing to be done on personal level. You have to elect a new government and experts to run the whole society in an environmentally friendly manner. I think that social ecology was always about the social aspect of another communal level, which is the democratic level

where people on the ground have actually direct control. On this level we can radically reimagine what our needs really are. This democratic aspect comes to completely reconfigure the essence of our contemporary needs. The problem is not how we will cover 100% of our needs by renewables, but what does this 100% actually mean?

BT: How much of the current capitalist excess can a renewable energy system support? And the answer is we don't need any of it. We need to do away with the massive waste and the massive excess in production and consumption that capitalism depends on. In the US capitalism recovered from the Great Depression of the 1920s and 30s by massively gearing up production to fight WW2. At the end of WW2, at the beginning of the 1950s, it was very clear that there needed to be a whole new model of consumption in order to sustain the industrial capacity that was built to fight WW2. In the '50s we had massive growth in consumption. Something like 10 times the rate of the population growth, which most environmentalists who claim that the problem is population have no understanding of. It was the period of creation of the suburbs, the interstate highway system and the patterns of planned obsolescence and continued consumption of unneeded and unwanted products. And the US saw an explosion of advertising which convinces people that they do want them... All these sustain the system and prevent it from going into another depression. And this is the system that I grew up during the 1960s and '70s and that people are still growing up in today: a setting where this level of excess is assumed to be the norm. I think we can all live a much happier and more fulfilled life without this excess consumption and that's the

kind of economy that can be fueled by decentralized community-controlled renewable energy.

PP: I think that direct democracy was with us all the time and it was the norm for most of human history. It's just capitalism that forced us to forget it.

YT: I would suggest that it was not just capitalism, but domination as a whole. Bookchin and Ocalan emphasized the first appearance of domination in the form of patriarchy and gerontocracy, i.e. the domination of man over woman and of the older (the knowledgeable) over the younger (inexperienced). It is very interesting the linkage of these seemingly distant occurrences with the current climate crisis. It was the replacement of feminist values (mutual aid and solidarity) by patriarchal ones (domination and violence), which made it possible for the human being to conceive nature as something below us, something to dominate over.

BT: In Murray's earlier works he really emphasizes the origins of gerontocracy, the development of early religious hierarchies, and ultimately the rise of the warrior class in many societies. And it was really his dialogue with some of the early eco-feminists like Ynestra King, who is a social ecologist as well, that raised the understanding for all of us of the central role that the domination of women by men played in that evolution – in the extent to which patriarchy really was the founding form of hierarchy. Certainly, that is, as you said, very central to the analysis of Ocalan and the Kurdish movement and that's why the Kurdish revolution is probably the most feminist revolution the world has ever

seen. After the Turkish invasion of northern Syria (Rojava), we hope that it will survive in some form somewhere in the Middle East.

YT: That's why direct democracy is a completely different civilizational model than what we have today. I would suggest that it is not coincidental that we see at moments when direct democracy is being implemented simultaneously with the resurgence of feminism and ecological thought. I will invoke two of the biggest examples of our time – the Zapatistas and the democratic confederation of Northeastern Syria. In both these cases we see that by building libertarian municipalist systems of interconnected councils and local assemblies, people begin thinking beyond the patriarchal framework. Direct democracy is a direct assault to patriarchy and gerontocracy. And then again also the relation between democracy and ecology. While this relation is well known for the Zapatistas, less people know that the Kurds have started the campaign “Make Rojava Green Again” where they try to detach themselves from the precarity of the oil economy and direct themselves towards a greener path.

IM: And what should we say about the difference between the city and the countryside? We know that social ecology focuses on the right to the city but there is the critique according to which every city depends on a countryside that feeds its population. What is the answer to this critique and what is the social ecologist proposal for a sustainable relationship between the two without exploitation and domination?

BT: I think that this is a very important question, to which I can give two answers. First, we know that it is possible to grow quite a lot of food in the city. There are cities in the world where farms grow not only vegetables but basic rice crops to feed people right in the middle of major cities like Kyoto. I have seen this in cities in Japan. We know that in many US cities there has been a resurgence of urban agriculture and even of farms at the scale that can feed significant numbers of people. We just had an important meeting, a congress of North American municipal movements, that took place in the city of Detroit, which until 20 years ago was the absolute center of the American automobile industry. All three of the major US auto companies had their primary manufacturing facilities in that one city. And then they started moving elsewhere. They started automating their facilities so that now they can manufacture cars with many fewer workers than they used to have. They started opening plants in places in the southern US that have very weak labor unions, and also moved production to other countries like Mexico. So, the city of Detroit lost more than half of its population over a 50-year period. There are huge city blocks where most of the homes are abandoned, where a lot of the old houses have fallen down and have been replaced by green space and people are using those to grow food. It's a majority African-American city that has a legacy of Black radicalism coming out of the revolutionary Black autoworkers' movement of the 1960s. And a lot of those same people and same organizations have been involved in creating ways to green that city and help it become more self-reliant, especially in food. So that's one part of the answer.

The other part of the answer is I think we need different kind of relationship between the city and the countryside. A non-extractive one, and a cooperative one, where communities of people in rural areas that are growing food to feed people in cities have an active and cooperative relationship with people in the neighborhoods they are feeding. Where maybe people from these neighborhoods come out during planting or harvest season when there is the greatest need for labor. The last time I was in Greece 6 years ago was the height of the financial crisis, and one of the things that was happening when young people here in Athens couldn't find work is that they were reestablishing their connections to the rural communities their families came from and were participating in growing food and bringing it back into the city. Social ecology was developed in Vermont during a time when a large number of people who had been active in the cities – in the New Left and the anti-war movement – were going back to the land, because they felt that urban life as they knew it was a dead end. Repression and the police state were becoming more extreme, and the way to live a more conscious life was to get out of the city, learn to grow food and learn to live on the land again. And there have been many waves of “back to the land” movements in many countries. Sometimes it happens during a period when a social movement is in decline and people are looking for the next way to turn and often they turn towards going back to the land. That happened to some extent after the Occupy movement, which at a time spread all over the US. When the intense repression led to the decline of the encampments at the end of 2011 there was a mini “back to the land” movement that included a lot of people who worked

as Occupy organizers. So, this happens repeatedly in the evolution of our movements and it is another important part of the answer to your question.

YT: What you spoke about takes us to the question raised by Bookchin in his very important work “Urbanization without Cities” and what “city” actually means. To what extent can the heavily urbanized areas be described as cities? We know that Bookchin derived his understanding of the city from the ancient Athenian polis, which importantly, was also directly managed by the citizens. In this line of thought one can suggest that cities are determined by their manageability by all their inhabitants. To what extent then can a megapolis, which is inhabited by tens of millions, be self-managed without the formation of bureaucratic layers? What do you think is needed to make our cities directly manageable by the citizens?

BT: The way we can directly govern our cities is through the establishment of confederations of self-managed neighborhoods. The democratization of the city requires the reestablishment of something that existed up until the post-industrial age, which is urban neighborhoods that have a sense of integrity, identity, and mutual aid among people living on a block and having relationships with the people on the next bloc, and defining the neighborhood as something that is a social, but also a political entity. On a neighborhood scale people can meet in face-to-face democratic assemblies just like we do in our small towns in Vermont. Our annual town hall meetings are really one of the oldest surviving institutions of direct democracy that are operating in the world...

YT: You are speaking of the New England Town Hall meetings...

BT: Yes, in the far Northeastern corner of the US. These are institutions of local democracy that go back to before the American Revolution. If you read Murray Bookchin's account in the first volume of his book "The Third Revolution" of how the American Revolution took place, you can see how these town hall meetings became increasingly open, increasingly participatory and increasingly radical institutions during the late 18th century. Many of them were started in very parochial ways: you literally had to be not only a white male property owner, but often a member of the right church in order to vote in the town meeting in the early period. But during the pre-revolutionary era these became much more open and egalitarian institutions. And those are the structures of town meetings that we still have in Vermont today. Every year, on the second Tuesday of March, in the town I live in and in all the surrounding towns people get together, debate issues, decide what the town budget will be for the year and also often pass resolutions, which tend to be just advisory, because the State has taken away many of the powers of town meetings to actually legislate. But we debate and pass resolutions on many of the big issues of our time like war, peace, climate change, nuclear power, protection of refugees and many others. What I want to say is that just like we have in our small towns, people in a neighborhood can meet in face-to-face assembly, which can take place more than just once a year as is the case in Vermont now, so as issues arise on a week-to-week and month-to-month basis people can collaborate and deliberate and have conversations about the issues that affect their lives and actually make decisions that shape the course of their

communities. And then neighborhoods can appoint delegates that are directly accountable to the neighborhood assembly to participate in a larger confederation of neighborhoods across the city. As long as these delegates remain strictly accountable and recallable by the neighborhood that they come from, the city can govern itself as a confederation of directly democratic neighborhoods.

YT: I think this also requires a certain way of urban planning, and I will recall Jane Jacobs here, that includes mixed neighborhoods, which include in themselves residential areas, places where people work or spend their leisure time etc. This tends to make people spend time in their neighborhoods, get attached to them and bond with one another, creating vibrant and resilient communities. Because nowadays there is the opposite trend of zoning such areas apart from each other, turning certain neighborhoods into worker barracks, while others are devoted to production, etc. Fortunately, Athens, like many other Mediterranean cities, is not following this trend so strictly and that is one of the reasons people are so vibrant here. But I know that in Northern America, as well as in cities in post-socialist countries, there was this pattern of zoning.

BT: Absolutely! In the US you have cities like Atlanta where the average person is driving the entire length of the city back and forth every day between where they live and where they work. I agree with you that this makes it much more difficult for neighborhoods to have the kind of integrity that it takes to be able to manage themselves.

PP: A lot of the cities are constructed to serve this capitalist mode of production and that's why I think we definitely need a new design for cities, which doesn't follow the neoliberal logic of using people simply as tools for production.

BT: There has been a lot of work in green urban design, some of which is being done by social ecologists like Mark Roseland in Vancouver, who is one of the pioneers in this field who came out of the Institute in the '70s, and other people who have been influenced by Murray's work and other works on social ecology.

YT: We see that in ancient Athens, during the democratic period, the city revolved around the *agora*, the space where radical free exchange of ideas happened, and the *ekklesia*, which was the general assembly. They were such interactive and participatory spaces that were the backbone of urban life.

In conclusion, I would like to ask you what is your opinion of the ongoing municipalist movements around the world, as well as the ongoing climate strikes? Do you see them with hope, as carriers of the seed of a more democratic and ecological society?

BT: Yes, I think that on the one hand we are living in an incredibly difficult time with the rise of right-wing movements and political parties all over the world, with climate change becoming a reality that people can no longer avoid. But at the same time people are organizing on a larger scale in more creative ways than we have seen in a very long time and there is much cause for hope. There was an article on the front page of the New York Times, asking the question,

why is there so much more protest now than there has been in longer than those journalists can remember? Of course, much of the article was bullshit but one of the things that was interesting was that they quoted a Harvard sociologist named Erica Chenoweth, who found that for most of the last generation when people went to the streets in a concerted way across the world they have won their demands in 70% of the time. But in the last 5 or 10 years it has become much more difficult. Mass movements are now only winning, say, 30% of the time. And in her view, this has raised the level of anger, as well as the level of determination to defeat this system, which has spent the last 10 or 20 years learning how to operate as if the opinions, needs, rights and desires of the vast majority of people just don't matter. And a system with that mentality simply cannot last and I hope that we are seeing the beginnings of the kind of convergence of movements that really makes it possible to overturn the system. I think it is a necessity to the point where the future thriving of not only human life, but all of life on Earth really depends on it.

YT: Thank you very much Brian, it was a pleasure having you with us tonight!

Libertarian municipalism, reclamation of ground & the victorious history of the democratic Milton Parc

A discussion between Dimitris Roussopoulos, Yavor Tarinski and Alexandros Schismenos

Yavor Tarinski: Dimitri, we are honored by your presence here in Athens and your participation at the Conference of TRISE and your inspiring input and we would like to continue today from where you left us after your talk. You spoke about the right to the city, you spoke about the strategies and the clear visions which we must develop, the democratic and ecological ones, in order to take back our communities that belong to us. Tell us a few words more generally about the right to the city as a concept.

Dimitris Roussopoulos: Well, as we know, after the whole crisis in Marxism or Marxist practice which emerged during 1968 and the famous general strike in France, serious people, theorists like Henri Lefevbre, who was a Marxist but was intelligent enough to be open as an observer of daily life and what was going on started going back in the history of left thought in the 19th century to see what threads there were over and above the standard dogma of the working class. Because he saw in 1968 that there were other actors on the streets. Because he was a very clear observer of what happened and why he came to certain

conclusions. But the thing that is absolutely amazing of that period and I just want to underline this, is that in January, February, March and April, up until the middle of April, when friends of mine would go to Paris and they would speak about intellectuals of the left and left-wing organizations and they would ask: 'what is happening in France? What is happening in Paris?' and everybody would say, without exception: 'Nothing. Everything is dead. Everything is dead, nothing is happening.' But on March 22nd, bam all of a sudden, from a suburb called Nanterre and we know what happened later.

So, a man like Henri Lefebvre, said, there is something different that is happening. And where is it focused? It is focused around, this is a very famous quote from him, "the real problems are the daily problems" of ordinary people. And the real problems that are daily for people are in an urban setting. That is where the social, political, economic and cultural contradictions are most in evidence, if you have eyes to see them. So, that is the beginning of the idea that the city belongs to us and we have to take it over in original ways. So that's the beginning of the idea of the right to the city.

Now, that idea of course evolved and it became wide enough, even among certain left-wing circles, so that everybody, from right to left to the center, started talking about the right to the city. For example, just recently, a United Nations conference placed in Quito, big UN conference in Ecuador and all of a sudden people attending this conference, statecraft politicians, as a certain person identified them, started talking about the right to the city. Because there was so much pressure, there is so much pressure, taking place that they start, as Herbert Marcuse would say, the genius of the capitalist system is the capacity to coopt the language, to coopt individuals.

So, when you use the term right to the city, you have to be aware of these very important differences. So, that's the short answer to your question.

YT: Now I would like to say that you have been an important actor in a very specific and important effort at this, a successful one, which is Milton Parc at your home city of Montreal. Can you tell us more about this right to the city in practice?

DR: Well, I will answer that question by also saying that I've been very active on the question at an international level. For example, I founded an Institute in Montreal on the urban question. What is important for us to remember is that we think of a number of questions. We think of the social question, we think of the women's question, and we think of these two questions as being connected, and now we are talking about the ecological question and the urban question has to be studied in a variety of ways. So, the Institute that I founded got recognition from an important Commission, which was devoted on the question of participatory democracy and social inclusion, which was a Commission of the UCLG, the Union of Cities and Local Governments worldwide, it is sort of the federation of all the municipalities, the official political bodies across the world.

The ecological question is very important in the organizing at the base. And the UCLG in Barcelona recognized that. And one of the things that we did at the beginning of 2001, I'd gone to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and I was very much impressed by their program and the way they look at things. Because, I've gone to many international conferences, and when I opened up their program as soon as I got off the airplane I see that the local problems were related to the regional

problems. And the regional problems were connected to the global problems and the global problems to the regional problems and the regional problems back to the local problems. So, there was a kind of a dialectical interaction between these three levels, not separating them, not studying them separately, but trying to understand what the relationship is between all of them. Well, I said, this is very interesting.

So, when I got back to Montreal, I said to our sisters and brothers around the Urban Ecology Center, what we need to organize is a Montreal Social Forum. And we did that in June of that year and it was a citizens' assembly. It was a citizens' assembly on the future of Montreal. At our first meeting we had 250 people.

But it was repeated again in the spring of the next year and out of that second citizens' summit came a radical idea. That people are citizens and as citizens they have rights. And they have rights not only at the national level, but they should have rights at the local level. So, we discussed and started promoting the whole idea of a charter of rights and responsibilities for the citizens of Montreal. And we had heard that in some European cities they were talking about the same thing, especially in Barcelona and Madrid.

And that's where this idea of the charter of human rights for the citizens of Montreal was considered. What is important about the charter is that it makes the emphasis on urban citizens, not national citizens. It's like when Cleisthenes said, forget the tribes, we are all citizens of Athens. Break the separation, this is one city. The whole idea of *polis* was beginning to develop there. So that's what we tried to do in Montreal.

So, what I did with this digression, is that I fast forwarded from the 1970s. Now I will go back and try to answer your question. But I fast

forwarded it because I wanted you to understand where the initiative was going. And we had this idea of where we wanted to go from the beginning. That's very important.

So, in 1968 something happened in my neighborhood. During the 1950s a real estate company called Concordia Estates Ltd., started to buy houses in my neighborhood. Very quietly putting together a mass housing project which they owned. And I want to tell you something because you will understand this more than most people. These people were at the top of the real estate company were all ex-members of the Communist Party. They left the Communist Party in 1956 because they were disillusioned and they became real estate agents, insurance agents and they crossed to the other side of the streets.

Alexandros Schismenos: After de-Stalinization...

DR: Of course. Isn't there a lesson to learn? Anyway, they amassed a certain amount of property. And their intention was to demolish everything and build the city of the 21st century. Condominium buildings, big apartment buildings. And, of course to throw out all the people who lived there and scatter them to the wind.

Immediately there was a convergence between people in the McGill School of Social Work, people who were studying social organizations, people who were training themselves to help poor people, people who were training themselves to be community organizers, in a formal kind of way, so there was a convergence between these people and a lot of young radicals from the 1960s, what we call the "New Left". And we started to do the work. What was the work?

We went door to door systematically, street by street, in order to tell people that there is a danger, that our neighborhood going to be completely destroyed and that you're going to have to leave, you're going to have to go who knows where. Because the neighborhood was what we call a 'heritage neighborhood'. It's like Plaka in Athens. Since the end of the WW2 it had deteriorated because the original middle class left and went to other parts of the city and it fell into the hands of young people, students, bohemians, intellectuals, the déclassé, people like me.

We called a lot of public information meetings and slowly we formed the Milton Parc's Citizens' Committee. Which at its height had about 200 members and then we started to do demonstrations, all the traditional protest forms of saying 'no, we don't want our neighborhood to be destroyed'. The political class was not interested in our protests. They said this is the future, this is what is called 'urban renewal', which meant you destroy the old and build up the new.

I had the idea of writing to all the architects in Montreal to ask for their help, which we did. One architect replied, but a remarkable architect. And he came to the Milton Parc's Citizens' Committee and we asked him to study the neighborhood and what he thought we could do about it. He was an urban conservationist, i.e. he was not interested in destroying the old because it is old. And so, he studied the problem and he came to the determination that to demolish the whole neighborhood, every square meter, to remake it into new, would cost 22 dollars per square meter, while renovating it would only cost 16 or 17 dollars per square meter.

Well, on economic grounds alone, in capitalist terms, it made more sense to preserve the neighborhood, to renovate it, than to demolish it and to start putting up new stuff. Now, you would think that we had a winning argument to convince the political class that the neighborhood should be preserved. No. Because of the economic interests, of course, behind all this, they were not interested.

So, we had to continue to protest and it went on for a long time, but more and more people were getting interested to help and outside of the neighborhood. It was very interesting that the alliance, the coalition that we created was between urban conservationists, architects, urban planners, who said that 'it doesn't make sense to destroy this area, this neighborhood, who need to support them' to left national organizations, francophone student organizations on the one side and other people on the other side of the fence, the Anglophone community and so we had a broad coalition.

Anyway, we tried everything. By 1972, 4 years later, our backs were against the wall. What else could we do? So, we decided to occupy the offices, to have a sit-in, to bring the culture of the 1960s into the struggle and we decided to occupy the offices of Concordia Estates Ltd. It was a large demonstration and 59 people were arrested. I was one of them.

So, we went to jail, we had a great time there, singing, dancing and we had a trial. And we wanted to have a trial in French, because most of us were Anglophones as a matter of fact, but we decided as a matter of principle that we wanted to have our trial in French, because that was a new recognition of what was happening in our city and in Quebec. We had a good lawyer with whom we collaborated and worked together.

We had various people, architects and urban planners, who testified the reasons why we did what we did, that we wanted to preserve our neighborhood, we wanted the low-income people like us to live in the neighborhood, we didn't want to go away. And at a certain point, the trial went on for about three days, at a certain point the jury went out to reach a decision, whether we were guilty or whether we were innocent. And they came in about 6 to 8 minutes and when the jury comes back that quickly you 're probably guilty. But the judge said to the foreman: 'Have you reached a verdict?' 'Yes, your honor, not guilty.'

We came out of that trial completely exhausted and discouraged. As a matter of fact, one of our members was so discouraged he committed suicide.

But there was a rather remarkable person as a member of our Committee and this book is dedicated to her. Her name was Lucia Kowaluk. And she said 'we're not going to stop. We're not going to give up.'

We started talking, debating and what we decided to do is stop talking about saving the neighborhood. We started to establish street committees on three or four streets. And we federated the three or four street committees. The objective is to change the traffic pattern on the streets. The street that I live on, which also Lucia lived on, was originally a residential street and it was changed into a highway because they were preparing to proceed with their demolitions and the constructions and so on. So, we started to have actions around traffic. And again, we went door to door, we again did information meetings and we blocked streets.

But the important thing is that you have to have the flexibility to move around in the urban question. If you are blocked for a certain period of time on housing, what is another important concern, what is another important daily problem? The real problems are the daily problems of ordinary people. And traffic on that street and the other streets was hell. What we would do, for example, in a street like this, we would block it and then we would have a big dinner on the street, 50-60 people, just blocking it. And the media would be there because the media like shows, they said 'why are you blocking the street? Why do you have your supper on the street, sitting on the street and stopping traffic?' I'll tell you why.

AS: Can I follow up? Because this is a very interesting point. I have a similar experience but less restricted at my student town, at Ioannina. There were two major urban struggles for public space. The one was lost, the other not so much. There was a motion from the municipal office to transform the main square of the city into a parking lot. So, there was a citizens' committee enacted by leftists and some of us students, inspired by Bookchin's 'The limits of the city' that was the only book available at that time in Greek that talked about urban problems. We tried to participate, we tried to inform citizens in the traditional political way and there were like 80 people from the whole city demonstrating, the police attacked us, we lost, now it's a parking lot. Beside that area there was a modernist building, Oasi, designed by a very well-known Greek architect, Aris Konstantinidis, which had been privatized and the owner had desolated it, took the money and left. The municipal authorities were prepared to sell it and create something else there. So, we tried to do something to inform people. We occupied the building, we planted flowers around, we organized Sunday coffee meetings so that old people could remember how it was, we organized

traditional feasts. However, we could reach more activists due to the block by traditional political parties and the leftists' and anarchists' preoccupation with other struggles. Due to one architect as well, she was a conservationist, we managed to present our case and finally we won and lost at the same time. We won the characterization of the building as a monument of cultural heritage, so it was restored to its original form. But we lost because we failed to take the creative step to self-manage the building, which again went in the hands of a private investor. And the public's access, social access to the building was cut off again, whereas our plan was to make it a free public space. We were very discouraged. And I wanted to ask you, how do we move from the defensive to the creative, where you can engage people not just to preserve a memory but make it a way of living? We were very discouraged by the anarchists and the leftists.

DR: We had the same experience; the Left did not understand and it was also an époque of a great deal of nationalist politics. Quebec is the most highly unionized part of Canada, if not of all North America. But the big labor federation was not interested in helping us at all. Because to them to demolish a neighborhood and build new buildings represents a lot of jobs. So that is what they were interested in. And at the big conference in 1968 they were there, supporting the project. But the other union, the second biggest one, which were more left and they also had an anarcho-sindicalist stream, they supported us.

So, what is important is not to pay too much attention to the traditional Left, the authoritarian Left. What you have to do are two things; you have to create broad coalitions with people who you may have disagreements with but whose support you need. And you have to be able to bring in ordinary people. And you have to be very patient with

ordinary people, because ordinary people do not have the skills to get up in front of a microphone to speak, they don't read as much, you have to find all sorts of different ways to communicate with them, you have to make it personal.

For example, this is typical, you have to have people who the community loves and respects. Now this woman, Lucia, was loved and respected by everybody. I was respected but I wasn't necessarily loved, because I was tough.

After the street demonstrations, what happened was that in 1976 there were the Montreal Olympics. So, because of the Olympics, the various elements of the political and economic class gave a green light to the developers and so they demolished one third of the neighborhood to build new buildings for the tourists, the millions of tourists that would come from all around the world for the Montreal Olympics.

After the Olympics were over there was a decline, there was a kind of crisis in the petroleum industry. And there was a kind of shaking of the confidence of the economic class that was happening in the area of growth for the sake of growth. And the developers, the leadership of Concordia Estate Ltd. began having difficulties in trying to convince the investors to go with the demolition of phase 2 and phase 3.

And at that vulnerable point this woman, Lucia, said 'let's meet with the developers to try to interest them in our traffic reduction plan.' Not about housing, the traffic reduction plan. So, she got this architect and other people and went to meet with the developer, and she asked 'would you support us in trying to reduce traffic in our streets?' And because one of the three major people was an ex-communist and still had a few sentiments in his bones, said 'of course we will support you'.

And then she said ‘well, how is it going with the project?’

He said ‘we’re having difficulties. And she looked at him and said ‘would you like to sell some of your buildings?’

And he said ‘make us an offer’. The door opened up a little bit.

We had a big meeting. ‘They’re interested in selling!’ In others words, from an economic point of view they were in a delicate position.

So, the coalition then decided to get the main National Government Housing organization, called Center of Mortgage and Housing Corporation to say ‘look, we have a developed community plan, we have a lot of people interested, we have a desire to stay in this neighborhood, not to leave, not to go into exile and we want to create what our original vision was.’ And going back to 1968 the original vision is that we wanted to create a cooperative community within which there is no-profit cooperative housing. Of course, in the political culture of Montreal and in Quebec the idea of cooperation is not foreign. It is something that is on the edges of the political culture, it almost comes from the countryside, where people help each other and in different ways than people help each other in the city. The solidarity in the city, actually, in the case of Montreal, comes from the countryside. They bring their personal habits into their neighborhoods. As a matter of fact, there is a famous slogan that was used time and time again, “Montreal is a series of little nations”, because people have a very strong sense of neighborhoodness. Sociologically and politically this is very important to understand.

So, the developer was interested in selling, the coalition said, we have to find the money to buy. Again, to make a long story short, we had to

do lobbying, we had to do this, we had to do that, knocking on doors of politicians, and at the end of all of this, because we had the coalition, we managed to convince the government housing organization, because of the popular base, to give us 25 million dollars. Not to give us, but to act as a guarantor to the financial institutions, the banks, to give us 25 million dollars, to buy phase 2 and phase 3 of the neighborhood and to renovate the buildings. And that was in the early 1980s. It took another 8 years to negotiate, to lobby and so forth.

And here is where fighting takes place. And here is where I become very aggressive with the political class. They lend us the money, but the banks wanted 7.5% interest. And people like me said no, that's too high, because if we get the interest at that level a lot of the poor people will have to leave, because they won't be able to afford to stay in the neighborhood. If you can't pay for the houses what's the point?

So, we had to do some very skilled political organizing. And, again to make a long story short, in 1980 there was a national referendum as to whether Quebec should separate from the rest of Canada. I went to the leader of the separatist Party, who I knew, and I said 'Monsieur Levesque, the federal government is not interested in being reasonable. We want an interest rate of 1.5%, not 7.5%.' He said, 'Dimitri, don't worry, if they don't want to help you, we'll help you, we'll help the project.' So, there was a very crucial strategic meeting with CMHC and the people who were there said, 'we cannot accept your offer at that rate, 60% of the people will have to leave and that doesn't work. And if you don't give us 1.5% you should know that at an office up the street there is a meeting taking place to organize a press conference to denounce you publicly.' Within about 3 hours two black limousines came from the headquarters. Out came the bureaucrats and they sat

around the room and they said 'let's negotiate' and the people said 'look, what we want is 1.5%, otherwise we are going to go public denouncing you and the Partie Quebequa, which had won the elections and was organizing the referendum are going to be there to help us.' Within 10 minutes the bureaucrats agreed.

For us that was a great moral and political victory. Because that's what we were fighting for. Not just to save buildings, but also give comfort to ordinary people. So, that was a major achievement and then, what we then started to do is to say, what can we do more to make the project secure?

Now, here's another reason why people hated me. There were about 40, 50 people in the neighborhood who said 'we believe in private property, we want to buy our houses. We don't want to have coops or non-profit associations.' So, they formed a little organization and started to fight against us. I fought and I brought people to understand that, if we allow private property to enter into Milton Parc, we will start rolling back. We will start introducing the very antithetical principles that in our gut we opposed. And we marginalized them, we discredited them, we showed that they were racists. They wrote newspaper articles implying that there were Jews behind the project. And it was important to use all this to discredit your enemy.

We wanted to protect ourselves against the virus of private property. So, we invented the idea around a land trust. A land trust is a legal arrangement, whereby the property, the land is owned in common. So, what we did is take the money, renovated the houses etc. Rather than forming a big coop I argued that we should form a number of small coops based upon affinity. So, there was a kind of bonding which was

the basis of solidarity and the basis of political collaboration. So, in Milton Parc there was a federation of 22 organizations, that have general assemblies and that are in the land trust, all is owned in common. So, his coop owns the buildings of his coop, our coop owns the buildings of our coop, but the land is owned by everybody. Therefore, radical conclusion; we abolished private property in the downtown of the second biggest city in Canada and we have taken 6 major blocks in the downtown area of the capitalist market-place. And we made enemies, the real estate industry hates us, the real estate industry has lobbied to prevent other Milton Parcs from happening, and the political class doesn't like us very much either, because we are a non-profit federation. We pay fewer municipal taxes than those who have private property. So, we have people who don't like us out there and they have managed to prevent a second and a third Milton Parc from happening in the city.

We also concluded, once we finished our victory, of what to give back to our society. Because we benefited from a great deal of public support and we benefited from a lot of public money, which we paid back. And so, in 1976 I helped establish the Montreal Urban Ecology Center, which is in the middle of the Milton Parc project. If you walk into the building and you go to the second floor you see a big picture of Murray Bookchin.

YT: So, it seems that your struggle had an organic transformation into a direct democratic community at the end of the day. An anticapitalistic democratic community. And you have referred to other similar experiences in history. You spoke about Red Vienna, Red Bologna, we can think of the participatory budgeting of Porto Alegre and so on. Can you tell us also about these experiences, because, as you say, each of these local struggles and experiences has its reflections on a global level

and there is a relation between all these cases of Milton Parc, Red Bologna, Red Vienna.

DR: Picture yourself in 1917 in Russia, in Petrograd and in Moscow and in many other places. What were the living organisms from February 1917 to the end of 1917? They were mass general assemblies and they were called Soviets. Very important to remember that those, the Soviets, were the main meeting places of workers, of soldiers, of all sorts of people who wanted to move the revolutionary experience forward. And you know as well as I do that in those Soviets from the Petrograd Soviet, the Moscow Soviet, the other Soviets, the Bolsheviks were a minority. And we know what they did as a result of being a minority. So, the idea of an assembly, democracy, which was what the Soviets were, large participation, articulation of what we want, what kind of work we want, what kind of workplaces we want, etc. etc., that idea was there.

So, in 1919, in Hungary, there was the first expression of what came out of 1917-1918. Black Rose Books will be publishing a great book called 1919, Budapest, the Republic of Councils. Because they established councils. That was the first major expression of what went on after 1917 outside of Russia. And another one was in Bavaria, in Munich, which was much shorter. The Hungarian Budapest experiment only lasted 8 months, but at least it happened. And in those councils were writers, artists, workers, people coming from the countryside, there was a mixture of people who wanted to change their society.

So, that famous year, 1919, in Vienna they elected a socialist city. And that socialist city was Red Vienna. And it continued until 1934, when the Nazis came in and destroyed it. And I remember, as if it happened yesterday, when I was at a Carl Polanyi conference in Vienna, we went

to Karl Marxfhof which was a huge housing project. One of the great things Red Vienna did is they completely transformed the housing of ordinary people, working people. They built major places where people could feel comfortable. And in the Karl Marxfhof, there is this big building, you could still see the bullet holes in the walls, where the population tried to defend themselves against the Nazis. In that building there was a laundry, there was a collective kitchen, there were daycare centers, it was a community approach. So, that was one of the major accomplishments of Red Vienna. They also completely transformed the public transportation commission, they introduced thermal heating by capping natural springs, creating a new kind of heating system. Not oil, not coal, but using the natural springs. So, they did a lot of radical things in Red Vienna. In another new book we are going to publish, called Take the city. On Radical Municipalism, there is going to be a very good article on Red Vienna.

Now in Vienna there is a kind of a celebration with a big exhibit on what happened during Red Vienna. It was not utopia, they didn't do everything correctly. One of the things that they did not do is that they did not express their solidarity to 1919 Hungary. Because the Austro-Hungarian forces tried to surround the Hungarian revolution, they did the same thing as they tried to do in the 1920s with the Soviet Union. But they were there until 1934 and what they achieved is still there in Vienna.

So, then, after WW2, with the big struggle between the various political forces in Italy the Leftist Communist Party took over Bologna. And they established Red Bologna. And there are several books on Red Bologna and they also did remarkable things, neighborhood reorganization, housing, transportation, sanitation, public health, all sorts of things that

Red Vienna had also done. And we know enough about the Italian Communist Party, that they were much flexible and much less dogmatic than the Greek Communist Party (KKE).

Grenoble is another very important center that inspired us, the urban Left, in Montreal. And what was very important and connects with Milton Parc later on is that we demanded the de-centralization of power from the city council to the neighborhoods. The de-centralization of political and economic power from city council to the neighborhoods. And today, my friends, Montreal has 19 boroughs. Like Paris. And in each one of those boroughs there is a mayor, there are city councilors and there are borough councilors, people who are elected to deal with the problems of the borough and each borough has its own budget, its own money, independent of city councils. So, there is a de-centralization of money. They are not direct democracies, but we have begun a process initiating the Milton Parc who established an ongoing citizens' assembly, now that we have this new social ecologist mayor and with brilliant organizers that we have in our Milton Parc's citizens' committee and there is a new preparation of creating a force around this borough, which is the second biggest, in terms of population, in Montreal.

In other words, what I am trying to say to you is that it's an ongoing thing. And there are ongoing urban battles, some of which we win, some of which we don't win.

And in conclusion I will say this, if I can conclude. Outside of the frontiers of Milton Parc there is an 800.000 square meter piece of land upon which there was the first major hospital in Canada. And the hospital has been emptied out for a whole variety of reasons. So, there are many of these buildings that are still in very good condition and now I'm

beginning to lead a battle to create a new land trust and a new community of non-profit cooperative housing, with citizens' association and cultural organizations and artistic groups, and organization called *Le Communité* [inaudible] And we have an architectural plan and now we have to start fighting with the political class.

Land, ownership and control of land is key to the urban question.

AS: What is very interesting is that creation of a common trust against private property. Because private property is what is used as a Trojan horse in Greece against social movements regarding land. You point out a meaning of citizenship that has to do with the common, not with the private, whereas in liberalism and in the dominant narrative citizenship is connected with the right to private ownership. Whereas your example is linking citizenship to the common ground and the common land. As regards the question of accountability, how do you deal with that issue?

DR: So, in the Montreal Citizens' Movement, which was a very democratic movement / party, congresses were fascinating and, it is interesting, when the MCM was first established in 1974, I and the other anarchists said 'we're not interested' and we gave a whole reason why we were not interested. Then, a year and a half later, there were a number of important radical intellectuals that were elected to the executive committee. And they started talking about Municipal Socialism. And what we decided is entryism. About 20, 30 of us moved in and our responsibility was to raise the debate and push the Party further to the left. And what we started to argue is the de-centralization of the City Hall towards the neighborhood. What we started to argue is that social housing had to be a priority. What we started to argue is free public transportation. What we started to argue is that we should create

neighborhood councils that are different from the bourgeois elected political bodies. They had to be a dual power.

One thing you have to understand is that I was working with Murray Bookchin for 35 years, from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. He would come to Montreal regularly, the telephone from Burlington to Montreal was always ringing. This is not known, except if you read Janet Biehl's book. So, many of these ideas were as a result of discussing them with Murray Bookchin. And in this new book that you both are putting essays in I wrote a very good essay on his influence and social ecology's influence on the whole 30 to 40-year history of Montreal. Because, if I must say so, and I hope it doesn't sound pretentious, Montreal is the one successful laboratory of social ecology. Apart from Rojava I don't know anywhere else.

AS: What's very impressive is that it is in the heart of a Western society.

DR: And it's not known widely enough, I'm glad you're doing this interview. So, we were talking about de-centralization of power but we were also talking about that the elected city councilors had to be revocable. And they had to be strictly mandated. So, we were introducing all of the principles of the CNT/FAI without calling them that. It's not important to label something and it's not necessary to only wear black. We know who we are and people at my city, in my neighborhood, know who I am politically.

So, the whole political culture started permeating with these things. So that when we had, in 2012, the most massive student strike, rebellion, marching, the Maple Spring. Massive demonstrations in Montreal, which, interestingly, started on the 22nd of March. And I said, 'I wonder whether they know the significance of this date'. And I walked up to the

people who were at the head of the demonstration and I asked 'why did you pick the 22nd of March?' and they replied 'Are you serious? We know why we picked this date!' It was a massive student uprising. But at the core of the student uprising was direct democracy. Through general assemblies of the students in all of the colleges and all of the university. That's why it was so massive, that's why it could not be broken, that's why it drove the media crazy. 'Who is your leader? We want to interview your leader!' There were three people who were identified, two men and a woman but they were strictly accountable to the general assemblies.

YT: Dimitri, I want to say that what you describe is a kind of return to the classic sense of the citizen. The citizen as a person that is capable of governing himself and participating in the government of the collective social body of which he is part of. And it is interesting to me because I know social ecologists and communalists strive to return to this concept, and not, as the traditional Left, to the proletariat. And I want to hear your thoughts about this, why it is important not to return to the worker, but to the citizen.

DR: Again, I go back to what has happened in Quebec and Montreal. In the 1970s the second biggest trade union had a kind of *crise de conscience*. They said 'what are we going to do now?' And they had a big conference and they adopted a magnificent document called 'Let us depend upon our own means'. Upon our ability to do things. Not the State, not this, not that, but ourselves. And in that manifesto, for the first time, they talk about the worker as citizen. That the worker has responsibility towards his community. And he has to work with citizens' associations. It is a magnificent document. And the whole essence of this manifesto is called The Second Front. We're opening the second

front. Beyond the workplace, we're opening the second front. And it created such excitement, people were discussing it, that the big trade union also produced a manifesto and the teachers' union also produced a manifesto.

And so, it was easy for us to sit down, for example, when the hospital workers went on strike north of Milton Parc, we sat down, we talked to them. We participated in their *pickage*, in their picketing of their strike place. You have to show your support to them, so they can show their support to you and that's the beginning of a new kind of solidarity. So, the concept of citizenship then takes on a new reality. So that it gives me great pleasure to tell you that when I once went to the Frankfurt Bookfair and I had behind me a whole room of French language publishers, the Germans would look at the Canadian passports and asked 'Are you Canadian citizens?' they would reply 'We are Montrealers.' And we have to use that more and more.

AS: We had a slogan 'Citizens, not customers', that resonated with efforts against the privatization of public space.

DR: Citizens, not taxpayers. Citizens, not consumers. All of these things. All of these have to be redefined and we have to appropriate this new language and we have to use it in our daily lives. And it becomes familiar, people pick it up.

AS: And it is a revolutionary word, the citizen. The *citoyen* in the French Revolution.

YT: And also, citizens, not vote casters. Because to be a citizen, as Dimitris has described very well, in Milton Parc struggles, was much

more than casting a vote once in a while, as it tends to be perceived in our Western societies.

DR: You have to work at it every single day, you need to have committed people, and it can be exhausting.

YT: So, let's conclude here. We thank you very much, Dimitri.

