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A Whole New Way of Life: Ecovillages and the Revitalization of Deep Community*

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Perhaps the most ambitious and self-conscious localizers are those who are creating ecovillages. Around the world, North and South, among rich and poor, diverse experiments are being conducted, each driven in part, it seems, by an expectation that life will be changing fundamentally and it's time to get ready.

Political scientist Karen Litfin has studied fourteen such communities on five continents, acquiring firsthand a sense of the practices and philosophies of those doing localization. Note that while she finds that these efforts fit no single profile ideologically or culturally, she finds them unified in their commitment to an affirmative politics, rather than a politics of protest. Perhaps most significantly, and maybe most surprisingly, she concludes that many ecovillages are best understood as "dynamic nodes of global engagement," not isolated enclaves of extreme localism. Finally note that, like so many current localizing efforts, "ecovillages have done [all this] so quietly that few people are even aware of their existence."

Climate change, the mass extinction of species, resource depletion—all of these point to one colossal conclusion: our everyday actions are unraveling our planet's life-support systems. Yet the greatest success stories of top-down politics are usually too little, too late. Despite a plethora of treaties, institutions, and organizations, our home planet's life-support systems are unraveling at an alarming rate. Yes, we need new laws and new products. But these piecemeal solutions only tinker at the margins when what we need are whole new ways of being that integrate the social, economic, ecological, and personal dimensions of life. . . . I asked

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myself, “Who is devising the far-reaching solutions to the sustainability crisis, and applying them at the level of lived experience?” This question led me on a nine-month sojourn around the world to study ecovillages. I visited fourteen communities on five continents, interviewing ten residents in each in order to understand what works and what doesn’t.

In response to the looming megacrisis, ecovillages have quietly taken root all over the world, in rich and poor countries alike. Their populations range from 20 to 2,000. Their beliefs are rooted in every major world religion, plus paganism and atheism. These communities are not just isolated enclaves; they are intensely engaged in public education and mutual learning. Since 1995, with the formation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) (see Global Ecovillage Network 2004), hundreds of ecovillages around the world have come together in order to share and disseminate their knowledge. Network members include large networks like Sarvodaya (11,000 villages applying ecological design principles in Sri Lanka) and the Colufifa network of 350 villages in Senegal; the Ladakh project on the Tibetan plateau; ecotowns like Auroville in South India and the Federation of Damanhur in Italy; small rural ecovillages like Earthaven in North Carolina and Huehucoyotl, Mexico; urban rejuvenation projects like Los Angeles Ecovillage and Christiania in Copenhagen; permaculture design sites such as Crystal Waters, Australia, and Barus, Brazil; and educational centers like the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. Dawson (2004) notes that these communities trace their roots to

- The ideals of self-sufficiency and spiritual inquiry embodied in monasteries, ashrams, and the Gandhian movement
- The “back-to-the-land” movement and, later, the cohousing movement
- The environmental, peace, and feminist movements
- The participatory development movement
- The alternative education movement

Ecovillages have taken root in tropical, temperate, and desert regions. Their specific practices vary according to cultural and ecological context, but the common thread is a shared commitment to personal, social, and ecological harmony. Beneath this commitment to social and ecological sustainability, one may discern a worldview premised on holism and radical interdependence—a radically different perspective from the assumptions underlying modern consumerism.

Unlike the larger environmental movement, ecovillages are not primarily concerned with protesting against state and industry lassitude. Rather than waiting for the revolution, they are *prefiguring* a viable future by creating parallel structures for self-governance in the midst of the prevailing social order. Their resource consumption is far lower than their home countries’ averages. And because they have found creative ways of limiting their participation in the global economy, their average income is low—dispelling the myth that sustainability is a luxury for the rich. Yet theirs is a culture of abundance, not deprivation. Focusing on the most practical and down-to-earth issues of life—food, energy, transport, housing, and, above all, community—this movement embodies a kind of hands-on, do-it-yourself politics, a politics of “yes.”

Ecovillages offer one response to the call for a new kind of environmentalism. An increasingly vociferous chorus of scholars, activists, and policy analysts warns that the prevailing economic and political system—including traditional activism—has broken down. John Dryzek, a pre-eminent scholar in the field, concludes that capitalism, interest-group politics, and the administrative state are “thoroughly inept when it comes to ecology” (2003, 474). Yale’s Gus Speth (2008, 86) concludes in his *Bridge at the Edge of the World* that “working only within the system will, in the end, not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself.” In their influential manifesto, *Death of Environmentalism*, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (2004) call for a radical, holistic, and affirmative rethinking of sustainability. Ecovillages have done just this, but they’ve done it so quietly that few people are even aware of their existence.

People long for a sense of integrity and deep connection, a longing that is all the more acute amid our harried, technologically mediated modes of living. After living in fourteen ecovillages on five continents, I have come to believe that this elusive sense of belonging is best nurtured when interdependence is no longer just an idea but is grounded in everyday life. We might install compact fluorescent bulbs and buy organic, but our actions are more palliative than efficacious. They are too small, both in material terms and as reflections of our humanity. This is because the creeping global crisis is not only a physical or political problem “out there.” It is a crisis of meaning “in here.” Therefore the truly effective alternatives will not only work pragmatically, they will also nurture within us a sense of deep belonging—to the planet and to each other. Given the scale and scope of the challenges ahead, our hunger for integrity can only be satisfied by the integration of ecology, economics, human

solidarity, and inner meaning in our daily lives. This is precisely what ecovillages aim to do.

This chapter offers an overview of the holistic approach to living that I experienced during my travels to fourteen very diverse ecovillages. The printed page, however, is not the optimal medium for conveying the colorful dynamism of these places. For those who wish to have a visual sense of ecovillages, I have posted a short video, "Seed Communities: Ecovillage Experiments Around the World," at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtNjZaXDGqM>.

In the following pages, I first explore the holistic understanding of life that underpins the ecovillage vision, with a special focus on its roots in permaculture. The next section investigates how the individual and the global are constituted within the holistic ontology that informs the ecovillage movement. I then discuss the intersection of lifestyle politics and transnational activism. Finally, I conclude with a brief inquiry into the question of effectiveness.

A Holistic Approach to Human Systems

Central to ecovillage life is the creation of virtuous cycles, as opposed to vicious cycles, which regenerate the land, enliven the community, and sustain its members in a cohesive whole consisting of integrated human and natural systems. Graywater and kitchen waste are recycled into community gardens; human manure is composted into landscape soil; rainwater is harvested for garden and home use; woody waste from community forests warms the homes of the residents. To the extent that ecovillages are able to generate a local economy based on community resources, money circulates internally and automobile use decreases. One expression of this holism, one that predates and powerfully informs the ecovillage movement, is permaculture.

Developed in the 1970s in Australia by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, permaculture focused on small-scale sustainable agriculture and integrated systems at the household level (Holmgren and Mollison 1978). Over the next two decades, the concept was adapted to diverse social and ecological contexts around the world. Its original land-use focus was extended into every aspect of *sustainable culture*, including matters of social and spiritual well-being. Most important, permaculture promotes bottom-up social change rooted in design principles observable in nature. It locates the drivers for social, economic, and cultural change at the individual and the household level. Ecovillages have expanded this vision

Permaculture has been tailored to local contexts by ecovillages around the world and its core concepts infuse the ecovillage movement:

1. Design from nature,
2. Catch and store energy,
3. Make the smallest intervention necessary,
4. Use small and slow solutions,
5. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback,
6. Produce no waste,
7. Use and value diversity,
8. Integrate rather than segregate. (Holmgren 2002, viii)

Drawing on the science of ecology and an acute awareness of industrial society's fossil fuel dependency, permaculture emphasizes the wise husbandry of energy resources. Living systems, including human ones, are understood in energetic terms: food, trees, soil, buildings, modes of transportation, water—all are embodiments and conductors of energy. The consequences ramify across systems. In food production, soil fertility is enhanced through composting, thereby minimizing the loss of energy. Likewise, the perennial edible landscapes associated with permaculture, including food trees, berries, and herbs, decrease the energy input required for food production. Permaculturalists are attentive to the health of forests because trees, more than any land species, accumulate biomass rapidly and thus represent a tremendous storehouse of energy. Not surprisingly, most of GEN's Living and Learning Centers offer permaculture courses.

Nature knows no waste, yet this human construct is a foundational premise of modern industrial societies. Permaculture seeks to close the cycles of production and consumption, thereby minimizing waste, through such low-energy technologies as the composting of agricultural and human waste, the use of renewable energy, the recycling of gray water into food production, and the use of natural building materials such as cob, straw bales, and compressed earth blocks. Ecovillages, which grew in part from the permaculture movement, are demonstration sites for these and other low-energy, earth-friendly technologies.

Permaculturalists foresee the eventual elimination of the "fossil fuel subsidy" and a "descent culture" moving toward a low-energy, sustainable future in the coming centuries (Holmgren 2002, xxix). I found variants of this macrolevel perspective about energy descent in most of the ecovillages I visited. Their use of low-energy building materials,

frequent preference for using human (as opposed to machine) energy—all of these practical applications come as a natural corollary to this macrovision. Most ecovillagers I spoke with were acutely aware of world energy trends. So I was not surprised to find some apocalyptic and neoprimitivist thinking among them, but I was surprised to find relatively little of it. Some of the more optimistic prognoses stemmed from a belief that our tightly networked, information-rich culture will facilitate the rapid innovation and spread of sustainable living practices. David Holmgren (2002, 22), one of permaculture's founders, articulates this view of modern society as a "fast-breeder system that generates new information, knowledge, innovation and culture."

GEN got started just as the Internet was gaining widespread use. Given the global nature of the movement and its aversion to fossil fuel usage, the Internet has been key to disseminating information, sharing best practices, and organizing regional and global conferences. Ecovillages are therefore hubs of learning. A constant flow of exchange with other communities and visitors moves across their porous boundaries. I was intrigued by some of the resulting combinations of low-tech and high-tech: computer programmers, web designers, and telecommuters living in solar-powered treehouses, adobe cabins, and rammed-earth huts. Ecovillages are not isolated enclaves of escapists; rather, they are dynamic nodes of the information society.

Despite the *eco-* in *ecovillage*, most people told me that their greatest joys and challenges come from the social aspects of community life. Besides being laboratories for ecological living, ecovillages are also experiments in radical democracy. Most of them operate by consensus decision making. This doesn't mean that everybody necessarily agrees on everything; it only means that people must be sufficiently satisfied with decisions not to block them. The basic idea is that the best decisions will be made when minority views, rather than being overruled by the majority, are considered and incorporated into better proposals. When it works well, consensus decision making is an inclusive, cooperative, and egalitarian process. When it doesn't: welcome to the flipside of mainstream democracy—tyranny of the minority.

While human relationships are the most fractious aspect of community living, they are also the most potentially rewarding. Fortunately, today's communities are the beneficiaries not only of the information society but also of a host of skills in consensus decision making, meeting facilitation, and nonviolent communication. Consequently, the trends are towards stronger interpersonal clarity, shorter meetings, greater transpar-

ency and trust, and more individual freedom. These trends are amplified by the information-rich context that ecovillages inhabit. Permaculture offers design principles for social as well as ecological sustainability: apply self-regulation and accept feedback; use and value diversity; integrate rather than segregate.

The work of connectivity entails recognizing and appreciating how the world looks from the vantage points of others: other people, near and far, and nonhuman others. The primary instrument for this work is empathy—what the Dalai Lama calls "the master emotion"—and the work is simultaneously political, social, economic, ecological, and spiritual.

Holism: Linking Self to World

The holism of ecovillages is not only pragmatic in its design from nature, but also serves as a source of meaning for the individual. Rather than becoming lost in the whole, which from the atomistic perspective of modernity would be the inevitable fear, each individual inhabits the center of a series of concentric circles beginning with home and extending to community, ecosystem, nation, and planet. This holism challenges the possessive individualism of modern consumer culture by integrating person and planet within the context of community. Recognizing their own complicity in replicating the social structures that threaten to unravel Earth's life-support systems, ecovillagers accept responsibility for their own lives even as they seek to invent alternative social structures.

Yet some critics of "lifestyle strategies" view ecovillages as self-indulgent, escapist, and ineffective responses to the powerful global structures that perpetuate socioeconomic injustice and environmental degradation (Fotopoulos 2000). This perspective fails to appreciate the radical consequences of a holistic worldview. From a mechanistic perspective, neither the lone individual nor tiny communities have the power to effectively counter enormous institutions; they are simply too small. From a holistic perspective, however, the networks of interdependence within a system are so intricate and tightly interwoven that one can never say for certain that an individual's actions will be insignificant. In the words of ecovillage proponent Ross Jackson (2000 37–38), "We are like individual molecules being perturbed on a global scale by a technology that is too powerful for us to handle in the dream state. We will have to wake up soon." Jackson believes that the vehicle for this awakening will be "self-organizing systems: a grassroots local initiative, a decentralized explosion

of energy with a global vision." From this perspective, it is quite possible that effective responses to the sustainability crisis could come from individuals and communities—especially if these local entities are globally linked.

The global ecovillage movement is politically unconventional for another reason: it is an affirmative movement, not a protest movement. Rather than resisting what they oppose, ecovillages are building an alternative from the ground up, an approach that makes sense from a holistic perspective. If the world is radically interdependent, then establishing alternative social structures with the potential to ramify may be more effective than simply saying no to unsustainable systems. Moreover, there is the question of integrity. Ecovillagers tend to be wary of the scale and complexity of global social and technological systems, believing that responsible action is most viable at the scale of the individual and community.

Unlike earlier intentional communities and back-to-the-land experiments, ecovillages are not isolated enclaves. They tend to be active in local, national, and transnational politics. Political engagement follows from a holistic understanding of the world because individuals and communities are always embedded in larger ecological and human systems. Most of the ecovillagers I encountered saw themselves as engaged participants in planetary socioecological systems rather than as utopian fugitives. On a principled level, they view their lives as pragmatic responses to the interrelated global dynamics of North-South inequity, global commodity chains, structural violence, and fossil fuel consumption. At the level of action, ecovillage activists have been prominent players in the movements for peace, human rights, and global justice.

Ecovillages are a conscious response to socioecological realities in the global North and South. In affluent countries, ecovillages seek to reinvigorate social life and decrease material consumption. In developing countries, ecovillages aim to preserve village life and enhance material living standards in a sustainable manner, thereby providing an alternative to poverty, urbanization, and corporate-led globalization. Because a large number of people in developing countries still live in village settings, the foremost concern of Third World ecovillage movements is to incorporate appropriate technologies and community-building skills into existing villages. In industrialized countries, where small-scale communities have been overtaken by the forces of urbanization and suburbanization, ecovillagers are establishing islands of relative sustainable community in a sea of affluence, alienation, and wastefulness. Yet, like their counterparts

in the South, they seek to meld the best of new appropriate technologies (e.g., solar, wind, and biofuel energy sources) with traditional practices (e.g., mud building and organic farming). In both contexts, the village model is seen as a compelling response to the global economy, succumbing to neither the affluence of the overconsuming North nor the grueling poverty of much of the South. Thus, the ecovillage movement represents an effort to forge a third way, applying and integrating the best practices of North and South with sensitivity to local context.

At the level of political action, opposition to economic globalization serves as a rallying point for ecovillagers around the world. Yet even in their opposition, they move beyond the politics of protest. For instance, during the 2005 G8 summit in Scotland, Findhorn members helped to create a temporary ecovillage as a counterpoint to the unsustainable policies being promoted at the summit. The demonstration ecovillage included composting toilets, graywater systems, solar panels and wind turbines, and kitchens serving fair trade, local, and organic food. The G8 action "illustrates the primary gift of ecovillages to the wider sustainability family; namely, the impulse to move beyond protest and to create models of more sane, just and sustainable ways of living" (Dawson 2006, 38).

Ecovillages are heavily involved in international peace, humanitarian relief, and solidarity work. Sarvodaya, GEN's largest member, has been an active peace broker in Sri Lanka's long-term civil war. Both Sarvodaya and Auroville assisted in tsunami relief work. Plenty International, an NGO created by The Farm in Tennessee, specializes in bringing soybean agricultural training to the Third World. Tamera ecovillage in Portugal, which considers itself a "research center for lived peace," is involved in conflict resolution work in Colombia and the Middle East. Ecovillagers in Denmark have partnered with ecovillagers in Senegal to send thousands of bicycles there. Far from being exclusive enclaves of escapists, many ecovillages are dynamic nodes of global engagement.

This engagement is also evident in the many ecovillage educational centers—especially GEN's five regional Living and Learning Centers. These full-immersion, hands-on learning centers teach a compendium of sustainable living skills, including organic gardening, living systems for water cycling, renewable energy sources, earth-friendly building from local materials, alternative economics, and community building and conflict resolution skills. Local skills and knowledge are woven together with permaculture methodology, forging workable solutions to the specific problems faced in each culture (Snyder 2006).

The holistic vision of ecovillages, while focused on sustainable living practices at the individual and community level, is also a globally engaged vision. At all levels, from the individual to the global, the focus is on establishing ecologically and socially viable alternatives on the ground.

The Power of the Small

Even if ecovillages are internationally engaged and demonstrating the practical viability of a holistic worldview, their numbers and influence are so small that one must wonder if they should be taken seriously. They might provide a cozy green life for a few lucky individuals, but can they ever hope to be effective as a transformative force in the face of global capitalism and the culture of consumption? If anything, the problems of environmental degradation, social alienation, and North-South inequity have only worsened since the inception of the ecovillage movement. Yet, on a smaller spatial scale and a longer temporal scale, there are good reasons to be impressed by the actual and potential effectiveness of ecovillages.

First, these communities demonstrate concretely that material throughput can be substantially reduced while enhancing the quality of life. Many of the ecovillagers I interviewed live on a tiny fraction of the average income for their countries. Residents of Earthaven, an ecovillage in rural North Carolina, live comfortably on less than \$8,000 per year. Likewise, members of Sieben Linden in Germany live well on less than €10,000 per year. These numbers undercut two widespread assumptions: that high levels of consumption are correlated with well-being and that sustainability is a luxury for the affluent. Second, ecovillages show that we can live well while dramatically reducing our consumption and waste. Residents of Crystal Waters Permaculture Village in Australia, for instance, have been able to reduce their per capita solid waste by 80 percent over the regional average. A 2003 study by the University of Kassel found that the carbon footprint of Sieben Linden was 72 percent below the German average. Even in the suburban Ecovillage at Ithaca, a very middle-class U.S. ecovillage, the per capita ecological footprint is 40 percent lower than the national average.

While ecovillages may show that another world is possible on a minuscule scale, the question remains: Can global systemic change come about through a network of communities committed to social and ecological sustainability? The short answer is: We don't know. In the absence of more far-reaching forms of political engagement directed toward

structural change, the strategy of lifestyle politics is a doubtful one. Yet, as we have seen, many ecovillagers are also working for structural change.

Ecovillages are not *the* answer to the sustainability crisis. They are just *one* answer—and we need all the answers we can get. Ecovillages are seeds of hope broadcast across the global landscape, small and sparsely sown. Time is short. We can't all go out and build new ecovillages, nor should we. We can, however, apply the lessons of the ecovillage in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. In essence, this is what the Transition Towns Movement is about: a scaled-up and highly dispersed rendition of the ecovillage model. The basic principle is simple: sharing—sharing material resources, ideas, dreams, skills, stories, joys, and sorrows. We don't need to live in ecovillages to abide by this principle. And if we did live by this principle, our communities would look more like ecovillages.

If existing ways of living are not sustainable, they will cease. The only questions are when and how. Whether the demise of the current order is precipitous or gradual, any successful experiments will become enormously salient. From that standpoint, even if the seeds of the ecovillage movement seem sparsely sown and its successes modest, the whole new way of life ushered in by this movement takes on a new light.

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III

Philosophies of Localization