08 2005

Free Cooperation

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Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Bremen, Germany, 32 min., 2003

Political utopia is nothing that would be obsolete in modern or postmodern days, it's nothing that can be ruled out today, but of course there are some things, some aspects that have to be different. Political utopia, utopian thinking today has to differ from most of the stuff we are familiar with as political utopias. I think the first important thing is that it has to be non-prescriptive. Most utopian thinking is prescriptive in the sense that it dictates to people on what to do. The idea behind it is that if you set up proper rules, then society will run okay. But these rules have to be respected. Of course, it's like a cage built by the author of the utopia, and then you can put people in, and they have to follow the rules, and then it will work. And this, I think, is something that is not acceptable today and can never be a free utopia. So, you have to build your utopia on the fact that people do what they want. You cannot impose your ideas of the right consciousness, of right and wrong, you cannot rule out some desires, some actions as wrong, this is what you have to do. I think this is very important.

I think it is also necessary that utopian thinking is not elitist in the sense that you have an elite that has the right consciousness, the

right knowledge, a group of decision-makers, of scientific thinkers that can define for others what is the real case, but you have to build utopia on an equal community, where it does not matter what people have read and what theories they are acquainted with. Yes, it has to work with different people and they have to have the possibility of participating on an equal basis. They should not be excluded, access to this utopia should not be restricted by the question where people, where a person comes from.

I also think that today political utopias can no longer be hierarchical. By this I do not want to stress the point of hierarchy and organization, but a hierarchy of main stuff and minor stuff, of the fields of the social that are seen as important and others that are seen as not so important – which is typical of classical utopias. In fact, we know a lot of utopian thinking that says, "The core business, what we call economy, is what big business does; is how tools are made. And other aspects, like raising children or doing creative work, acting together in a modest and proper way, are minor stuff and have to follow the rules of the others. And, I think this is illegitimate – because it is always combined with a hierarchy between different people doing different stuff in these utopian societies – and a clear case of inequality. So, one could say you have to bring utopia back to the kitchen. It has to work there and the rules of the kitchen have to be the rules of bigger cooperations – not the other way round. Everything that people do together is a kind of cooperation, because they share work and they use the work and the experience and the bodily existence of others – also history in direct and indirect ways. And though there are two extremes, free cooperations and forced cooperations, most of what we know in most societies is forced cooperation.

There are three aspects that have to be taken into account if you want to build a free cooperation. The first is that all rules in this

cooperation can be questioned by everybody, there are no holy rules that people cannot question or reject or bargain and negotiate about – which is not the case in most of the cooperations and organizational forms that we know.

And the second aspect that has to be guaranteed for free cooperation is that people can question and change these rules by using this primary material force of refusing to cooperate, by restricting their cooperation, by holding back what they do for these cooperations, making conditions under which they are willing to cooperate, or leaving cooperations. They must be guaranteed the right to use these measures to influence the rules and that everybody in the cooperation can do this.

And the third aspect – which is important because otherwise it would be just a blackmailing of the less powerful ones by the more powerful ones – is that the price of not cooperating, the price that it costs if you restrict your cooperation or if the cooperation splits up, should be ...not exactly equal ...but similar for all participants in this cooperation, and it should be affordable. That means, it can be done, it's not impossible, it's not a question of sheer existence to cooperate in this way.

So, if these three conditions are guaranteed, a cooperation is free or can be free, because everybody can question and change the rules, can negotiate about the rules by using his or her power to restrict what he or she puts into this cooperation, or by splitting up and searching another way to cooperate with other people and other groups. And the idea is to say that this third aspect, the price, which is not money necessarily, the price that it costs to split up or to restrict cooperation – to make this price equal and possible for all participants, that's the core business of leftist policy, that's the real core business, that's what leftist policy does, it adjusts rules in

a way that people have the same power to influence rules because the price that it costs them if there is a split or if they restrict their engagement is the same for everybody.

A good example of free cooperation is the way the women of the Zapatistas acted in the phase when the movement started and the decision about how to fight and when to fight the Mexican government, and when to use even military force was to be made. Because according to reports, there was an assembly of the women who took part in the movement and they made clear that there were certain conditions for them under which they would participate in the fight and which they wanted to be realized: questions of representation in the movement, of acknowledgement of women's rights by the movement. If this was done, they could participate, otherwise there would be just a "no" from them. And I think this is a good example, because that's something that went wrong in a lot of national and colonial liberation movements we know, because there the form was the main question…now one has to fight a colonial system, everybody has to join this fight and other questions have to be addressed later on – which, of course, doesn't work, because the point when you start is the point to enter into some basic negotiations. And they used their kind of power, that is, they used the possibility of refusing to join the movement, they made conditions for their cooperation and they did it in a way that was based on their power as a group. There was no need for them to infiltrate the formal base of decision-making in the Zapatista movement, these things work independently of how these structures are organized. They came together as a group and said, "We will participate 'only if… yes' or 'yes, only if…' or 'no, if not…'" And that's also typical, because it's not necessary that everybody understands their motives or their reason, it's not necessary that they explain everything about it. It's just a

negotiation which takes place and a decision that can be made. And I think this is very important for free cooperation and their primal force, because it's close to the point where this force gets lost in most systems of formal representation, of formal decision-making – so much is ruled out because it doesn't fit as a system. But, in this example, this force was really used.

If we try to get closer to the concept of free cooperation, if we ask what kind of politics derives from this concept, I think it is necessary to give a kind of overview of what kinds of instruments are used in forced cooperations, what levels of force exist in society and what is needed for every group that wants to liberate itself and fight this. If we do this, we will also see that different social movements have centered or focused on different aspects of forced cooperation, which accounts for contradictions between them. Not all of these contradictions are necessary; a lot of them can be explained by different historical contexts and a different situation.

I think, on the one hand, it is useful to make clear that force is exercised on various levels, let's say on five different levels ranging from direct, material force – brutal force, if you want – to various forms of economic force, which use dependency, different kinds of control, to more genuinely social forms of force like discrimination, for which just a special kind of behavior of people in a group is needed and not necessarily anything more drastic.

There's also a level which has to do with the control of the public, the control of who can speak and who is heard in a society, and there's a level that has to do with forms of dependency in general because the more you are dependent on a cooperation, the less you are free in your acting against it.

These are different forms of force and, on the other hand, you can make a kind of matrix out of it. There are some steps that every individual or every group that wants to liberate itself has to take. First, you have to dismantle the instruments of domination; you have to abandon the idea of using them for better things. Taking over the citadels and then pursuing a better policy – no, you have to bring down these instruments of force, you have to find alternative ways of cooperation and negotiation, alternative rules of the social, which… I use the term of the politics of relationships because it's used in the Italian feminist discussion. You could also say you have to find alternative ways of socializing, you also have to develop new social abilities, which we do not have or which we lose in our social systems because we are not trained in how to negotiate with each other. You also have to develop forms of getting independent and forms of articulation, critical articulation, of reclaiming public space. So if you do this, you will get a kind of matrix and then you will see that the concept of the politics of free cooperation is not something that somebody invents as a blueprint, it's something that's derived from what social movements have been doing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It's very important that the concept of free cooperation does not dictate special ways of structuring societies or any other levels of the social. It's just a way how decisions are made. It can and will always include the rule-making that enables groups and people to make decisions that are not made by every member of this group. It also enables groups to say: We want a special kind of rule here, which is necessary for us now at the moment, which may not be the ultimate idea in the long term, but we can choose it as long as there is a guarantee that it can be reversed. I think this is important because it enables groups and movements and big

communities to learn, to experiment, to adjust their forms to the problems they face.

We tend to be very critical of other communities by pointing out aspects which, on the face of it, run counter to the notion of freedom and equality. We say, this liberation movement in its fight has a kind of military hierarchy, but I think this is not the point. The point is: Is it possible for these groups to reverse this decision? Is it really a decision that is made, under conditions of equality and of their own free will, by the participants because it's necessary in that fight? Or, has it come to a point where it cannot be stopped, where it's not possible because of new inequalities to take this back? Which, of course, is the case in most examples, but this is a different question. I think it is possible to question what other communities do, in this way, but this does not mean that I can speak for them and decide what is right for them now. But, I can point out problems and developments I see. I can point out when there's really no possibility of free and equal decision-making and cooperation any more.

An interesting question that is often raised is: What does free cooperation mean as a kind of economic concept? Is it possible to run a business cooperation as a free cooperation? What does it mean, what does it look like? Isn't it impossible because enterprises can't split up if the people working there disagree on the future course of this enterprise? And, doesn't it introduce an element of instability into the whole system? Do we not have to rule this out? Isn't free cooperation based on the condition that everybody has enough to eat and a decent living, and this is guaranteed by what the economic process does, so then it's not itself subject to free cooperation?

And, I think this is a very important point; because, of course, enterprises can be run as free cooperations. And again, we know examples of this from different kinds of social projects that deal with money, that produce things and are run as a free cooperation, with people negotiating, agreeing and splitting up if they do not agree any more, and finding ways of how to do it in an equal and just way. And, we also have examples from this so-called third sector, where groups deal with public money and public capital, which is given to them to bring special results, but which are also free with regard to the ways they achieve it. I think we have these examples and it is clear that it is something that would change structures in enterprises in a radical way. Because if you apply the concept, then it is clear that we have to do a lot in every concentrated economic organization. That rules out the possibility that there are people who have such a special knowledge that nothing can be done without them, for example. So, it also has to imply processes of distributing knowledge and abilities. It also takes an environment where it is possible for people to quit and leave, yes, because there are other possibilities for them – which means they have their form of material existence guaranteed, it does not depend on their job there. This means that public investments are affected in a way that there is not only one structure where I can work with my professional knowledge, I can choose them, and which guarantees that I can take my fair part of the whole with me – which, of course, is a radical question, but it is absolutely necessary. And, I cannot see why it should not be possible for enterprises to split up if there are disagreements about their future course. We already see it today: big capital splits up small capitals, recombines the whole, it does all of this stuff and we find it quite natural, and yet we cannot imagine the people who work there, who cooperate there, doing it themselves.

And, I think there is another very important aspect, that is, if you mention enterprises as a form of free cooperation, we need forms to bring in the people outside. This was a blind spot even in some experiments within socialist countries which came close – like the idea of a workers' democracy within the enterprise – but which excluded all the people outside. So we also need to ensure that their form of cooperation – because they enable the enterprises to do their stuff – is represented in a way. I think that we will need a lot of practical experience to do that. We also need a review of historical experiments with it, which is not done today. And, I think it is crucial, because the question of how to deal with this economic power, of course, is the core of how to deal with social power at all.

The main question with regard to implementing free cooperation in today's world, of course, is the question of property. I think for this it is necessary to underline the idea that all property or social capital is something that is based on collective work, of course, not only even on the work of people living today, it's also something that capitalizes on the activities, the work, the thinking of people of the past, of a very large number of people and their lives. So this kind of capital, which we are concerned with in the form of, say, technical or social knowledge, in the sense of industrial capital, of intellectual capital, which is very important today, is something that cannot belong to a small number of people only, just because they are the CEOs of a company – this is just ridiculous. On the other hand property, the access to capital is something that is necessary for people. It is nothing one has to be ashamed of to claim a share of property in the world, because we need the work of others, we need the access to capital to do things, to survive. So it is not conceivable to say there are no forms of property at all. I do not think it is conceivable to say we should have a society or a

community where everybody does what he or she likes and takes what he or she wants. Rules regulating access to property are necessary and I think this includes the necessity of transferring property, of distributing property in a more equal way than it is done today. It must be clear that this is a process that has necessary steps. Because we can acknowledge that property is not always something that can be cut into small slices and distributed. This is a process of reshaping property in a society, of redistributing.

An important issue that has to be addressed today is the mobility of capital. It's just the opposite of this idea of free cooperation that if there is a split, if people do not want to cooperate any more or have different ideas of what this cooperation should do, then the price of the split, of the reshaping of the cooperation should be equal. And this is the exact opposite of what big corporate capital does today, because it claims that it can take everything that moves with it to other places where people might be more obedient. And this is something that has to be restricted; otherwise it is not possible to develop forms of redistribution of property, of changing rules at all.

Capitalist markets have some aspects that cannot be transferred to a free cooperation. For instance, it is unacceptable, that the more successful a participant of the market is, the more they can exclude every other participant. And it's clear that in capitalist markets the main aspect of competition is not being better or having better ideas, but applying more force against others to produce cheaply. Of course, this cannot be an element of a market in a free cooperation.

The situation is not that we do not know any alternatives, or that there is no contradiction and no counter-movement to most forms of unfreedom and inequality. The problem is that they do not

support each other properly, that the movements are very specific in their cultural setting and exclude a lot of other people. This is still the case today. I think what is most urgently needed is a process of better and deeper understanding between different movements, a process of a cultural opening, and new ties between everyday life and everyday forms of cooperation, resistance, alternative cooperation and what we usually think of as the big political questions.

There is no real change of society and its structures without steps – but these steps have to be reforms in the sense that they should not only use movements but also institutions. We cannot get rid of every institution; we also need to lay down some achievements in laws, because that's the way a part of the fight is done. Here, one is always in danger of not seeing that this is only part of the fight and that you have to think about – in a utopian way – about the direction you are going. The way to a utopian society is not achieved only by heaping up different reforms on different items, it also takes some sort of direction, which is not found as a truth, but which is the result of negotiation between emancipatory movements. So I think there is a lot of ideas going around in the world today that are related to concepts like free cooperation and can be brought into an interesting discussion with it. This discussion is essential, because this kind of dialogue between different ideas, different people, different groups is necessary to build coalitions, and this is what we need today.

The text has been edited by Harald Otto in the course of the project transform *(http://transform.eipcp.net).*