



# Patterns

Newsletter of the American Society for Cybernetics

Winter 2009

## From the Editors:

This issue of PATTERNS is co-edited by ASC member Lee Worden with useful contributions from Elizabeth Simpson, ASC Vice-President. Lee earned his PhD, in 2003 in the Program in Applied and Computational Mathematics (PACM), Princeton University. His research interests involve Self-organization, collective dynamics and transformation, touching on Ecological evolution, community structure, and dynamics. This involves cultural change, consensus formation, democracy, cooperation and critical analysis of scientific discourses. He is particularly interested in ways of facilitating global justice, equality, solidarity and sustainability to challenge the mythology of economic competition, globalization and neocolonialism.

As guest editor, Lee suggested that we survey some current situations in global social movements, in terms that relate to questions about communication and systems processes of interest to PATTERNS readers.

Elizabeth joined us for awhile and has contributed an article and much good dialogue in the process. This will be my last issue as Editor of PATTERNS and I am glad to have had this opportunity to get acquainted with these two brilliant young social/activist/scholars. The previous Fall issue was co-edited by Tom Fischer, PH.D, another brilliant young member and present ASC Secretary. Based in Hong Kong, he teaches design throughout the world. Like Lee and Beth, he also is interested in how individuals relate to society. He feels a general need for an understanding of how positive and negative feedback loops play together to maintain the social balances that are needed in this crazy world and problems of globalization, democratization, etc. learning to think holistically....the natural way...pattern recognition, etc.”

As members of ASC, we have all had the opportunity to learn from each other—the older members, seminal

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## Cybernetics, Ecology and Global Social Movements

by Lee Worden, guest co-editor

### Theory and social change aren't so far apart

It isn't just movement leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Dr. Martin Luther King who work for social change. Many of us steer our lives guided by a vision of how we want our work to affect the world. This is certainly true of researchers who devote themselves to understanding how the world works, staying true to the work when support and acknowledgement are hard to find. Some believe that knowledge is a good in itself and sets us free, while others hope to help bring about an epistemological shift that will allow us to become better caretakers of the planet and our communities.

The connections between research and social change are subtle and penetrate deep in both directions. Setting out to work for change requires an understanding of the current situation and how it might change, while developing theory about the world and how change happens inevitably opens some doors to action and makes others less thinkable. These connections became unexpectedly clear to me a few years ago, when I was doing research as a graduate student in mathematical ecology. I set out to study how ecological communities behave and how they change over time, using standard mathematical models for population dynamics. Without expecting or planning it, I had the repeated experience of finding that the results I was seeing in these simple, cartoonish models speak directly to our expectations about relationships, interaction, and coexistence in our real lives. The stories we are told, and tell, about how the world works are built on implicit models of what happens when we interact, and those implicit models are not as authoritative as they seem. They can be challenged by alternative models.

When I made this discovery I was working with the Lotka-Volterra equations, a standard tool in population biology. In this framework, the interactions between several species are each represented by a single number. If there is a negative number for the interaction of species A with species B, it means an encounter with B hurts A by that amount (meaning that A is a bit less likely to have as many offspring as it would have otherwise). If it's a positive number, that encounter actually helps species A. This model is generally used to model competition and predation. Competition is represented by a collection of negative numbers — when there are many creatures around, it's harder for everyone. Predation corresponds to a positive-negative pair: when a hawk and rabbit meet it's bad for the rabbit but good for the hawk. I set out to look at how natural selection changes these interactions. Occasional mutations introduce slightly bigger or smaller numbers than the interactions already present. Some mutations take hold and others die out. Over time the interactions gradually change, and therefore the community structure changes.

I wondered whether food webs would become more or less complex, and whether competitive communities would diversify to explore more niches. Instead I found an explosion of cooperation: these creatures simply quit competing and begin to help each other.

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thinkers laying the groundwork, the Cybernetic Giants—the research and teaching Academics, exploring the potential of an expanding network of people—all of us making connections in the wider society. *We recognize that when, (in the words of Lee Worden) “Participants in the common project of maintaining a livable climate are not necessarily tempted to betray their neighbors ..... when the coordination does break down, they find a way to shift to a different “game” with a better outcome.”*

This issue of PATTERNS may be the last or it may be the first of a new species of “publications” meant to move us forward in the understanding and design of the world we create. Playing around with words as the environments within which we live, gives me a sense of the power of Cybernetics, the perspective which, of course, is the name of the game here. We are no longer in the static linear form of printed patterns, but with the ingenuity of Lee Worden, we see a Wikispace gathering on the horizon.

In an introductory essay, *Cybernetics, Ecology and Global Social Movement*, Lee will describe the participatory space on the internet (a wiki) for our use in creating a dynamic, experiential newsletter together... an experiment to encourage conversation as an active process of conscious evolution.

*You are invited to join us in an open online discussion of the themes opened by this issue of PATTERNS. Please join in by pointing your web browser to <http://new-patterns.wikispaces.com/>. You will find instructions there on how to participate.*

*“Either we are going to die together, or we are going to live together. And if we are going to live together, we have to talk.”*

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

## Cybernetics, Ecology and Global Social Movements

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[For references to material about these models, see the online version of the newsletter.]

It's clear in hindsight why this should happen: natural selection favors creatures that benefit from their environment, including their neighbors, and it isn't concerned with whether they help or harm others, so all these terms will tend to increase and become positive unless there is some factor stopping them from increasing. This is a plain, simple, and general result. Yet it entirely contradicts what I was led to expect: that cooperation is a rare, exceptional result that needs to be explained in each case where it surfaces.

There is an ensemble of well-known models that declare that cooperation is hard and easily subverted: the Prisoner's Dilemma of game theory (solidarity is hard because it's more rewarding to betray the other person); the Tragedy of the Commons, from development economics (it's hard to manage a common resource because it's more rewarding to take more than your share than to plan for the long term), and politics's Collective Action Problem (it's hard to get together for a shared purpose because everyone can leave it to the others to take care of it). I have come to believe that all three of these narratives are overblown, that while things like these sometimes happen, they are not inevitable and certainly aren't reliable paradigms for what to expect from the world, and that they contribute to authoritarian agendas. As I wrote in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, these narratives support “a widely shared view of the world in which cooperation is a mysterious anomaly whose existence is difficult to explain because of the universal temptation to defect,” and “appear to the lay reader or student as authoritative scientific statements legitimizing a bleak Hobbesian picture of humans as selfish, greedy individualists whose antisocial tendencies must be kept in check by coercive social forces.”

Once I understood what I was seeing in the ecology models I was studying, I was able to translate it directly into a game theory model in which the prisoner's dilemma evaporates, changing into an easy game where everybody helps each other because their own interest is aligned with the other person's interest. The prisoner's dilemma assumes that you get a reward for letting the other person down that is better than the reward for cooperating, but that's not necessarily true. Not only is the “temptation to defect” that characterizes the dilemma sometimes nowhere to be found, it's also sometimes possible to change a dilemma situation into a non-dilemma situation by changing the rules of the game. (One way to describe this is that while situations can be constructed in which betrayal is the “best decision” given the available alternatives, it isn't generally the “best alternative” even when only considering self-interested decision making.)

I didn't have an inkling of these possibilities until the models pointed them out to me. I thought I was investigating food webs and competition for resources, and I didn't expect it to have anything to do with cooperation.

Later, I had a similar experience in an unrelated research project — setting out to study a dynamics problem, and finding it unexpectedly interwoven with live debates about current events and what kinds of communities we can hope to create.

The question in this case was about the Gaia Hypothesis, which dates back to the late 60s. This is the claim that the different species on the planet work together somehow to control the atmosphere and oceans in a way that regulates the global climate, making it more livable than it would be otherwise.

The Gaia Hypothesis has developed a bad reputation among scientists, because no one has answered the challenge of what makes the different creatures “do the right thing,” when they could just enjoy the nice climate without paying the cost of contributing to its upkeep. As far as I knew, there hadn't been an open-ended modeling project aimed at finding out whether Gaia-style regulation would emerge when a handful of species are thrown together on a model planet and left to sink or swim together. A friend and I brewed a few pots of coffee and set out to see what we could see.

Eventually, when I was the only one still working on it, I got it sorted out. First of all, there are community structures that can regulate their surroundings without any excessive “cost”, in the sense that none of them can get an advantage by mutating to a type that doesn't contribute as effectively to the regulation process. Secondly, there's a neat little process called “sequential selection” that takes hold in the cases where regulation fails: when the community loses control of its environment, it comes to a crisis, which forces extinctions or other kinds of structural shift, after which the community may or may not be self-regulating.... This process can repeat, but it can only end in a Gaian community or in total extinction. [Total extinction is less common than it would be statistically, based on the rate of species extinctions, which appears to indicate some kind of tendency toward self-regulation in these model communities.] I wasn't the first to propose the possibility of a

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## Cybernetics, Ecology and Global Social Movements

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sequential selection process (that's Richard Betts, in the UK), but these models allowed me to clarify and generalize the idea, and they are the first demonstration of the process in action.

In other words, communities are able to find a way to work together, and the threat posed by selfishness is overrated. Participants in the common project of maintaining a livable climate are not necessarily tempted to betray their neighbors (just like the other model!), and when the coordination does break down, they find a way to shift to a different "game" with a better outcome.

Somewhere along the way I realized that this question about members of the community being tempted not to contribute to the common good is an instance of the Tragedy of the Commons narrative. By the same token, when these model communities succeed in working together for the common good, they show that the Tragedy of the Commons does not happen in these cases. In how many other places is the Tragedy of the Commons not a problem? How many other ways are there to pull collective triumph from the jaws of potential tragedy?

Of course, the Tragedy of the Commons isn't really an idea about planetary ecology, it's primarily about politics and economics, and the claim that common-property resources should be privatized or otherwise brought under central management, to protect them from overexploitation. It is used to justify massive interventions into traditional systems of resource management and dispossession of indigenous communities. In fact, commonly-held resources have been successfully managed for hundreds of years in many societies all over the world. My research project, aimed at seeing what ecological communities can do, dragged me once again, unexpectedly, into proposing a counter to the established narrative about how it's possible to live and whether things can be better than they are.

### Narratives Needed

These experiences have taught me that there's no separation between studying how systems work and talking about what kind of collective future we can hope to make for ourselves. Studying systems leads naturally into seeing our communities and societies in new ways, and brings out new narratives that can point the way to unforeseen possibilities for the future.

Meanwhile, it happens that new narratives pointing to new possibilities are exactly what is most needed right now, as the world economy is wavering on the edge of collapse, the world's ecological communities are already crumbling, and nobody knows what to expect from the future. Simultaneously, global social movements are coalescing that are unprecedented in scale and scope, and they are centered on exactly this task.

"Another world is possible" is the central principle of the World Social Forum, the meeting place that has developed since 2000 for the social movements of the world. But what kind of world? That's a hard question, one that can only be addressed by a combination of daring experimentation and deep thought.

*Who is better qualified to be a part of that inquiry than cybernetics and system theory scholars?*

*In this issue of Patterns, we are presenting a sampling of some of the exploratory work that contemporary social movements are doing, with the intention of highlighting some open questions and nascent possibilities, and encouraging Patterns readers to consider them and possibly to join in the ongoing conversations and social experiments. To that end, we are trying an experiment to encourage conversation. We have created a participatory space on the internet (a wiki, to be specific) for our use in creating the newsletter together.*

*Now that it's published, we are opening up the space for all Patterns readers to join in. Please come to the web site <http://new-patterns.wikispaces.com/> to be a part of the conversation.*

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## Online Social Movements

By Lee Worden

While many experience computers as soulless, frustrating office machines, they have simultaneously been a site of idealistic experimentation for as long as they have existed. The free software movement is the best example. Today you can abandon Microsoft Word forever and replace it with a completely free word processor that will work seamlessly with your existing documents (go ahead — download it from <http://openoffice.org>). If you choose, you can change and improve the program, unlike Microsoft's, and give away your creation to the world as well. Everyone else can take advantage of your improvements, and you get the benefit of theirs.

By working together in this open, collaborative way, fair-minded programmers have created freely available world-class worldwide web browsers ([www.mozilla.com/firefox](http://www.mozilla.com/firefox)), web servers (<http://apache.org>), a complete operating system that you can install in place of Microsoft Windows (help yourself: [www.ubuntu.com](http://www.ubuntu.com)), and free instances of essentially everything else that computer users need or want.

It's popular to speak of this massive collection of freely shared computing tools as a commons, meaning that it's available to and maintained by its community, not a private owner. This term points back in history, to the commonly held land that was enclosed all over Europe, and subsequently in the New World, at the dawn of the industrial era. Like the commoners' movements of the past and present, software activists fight for the right to share freely, and against the commercialization of our collective heritage and the products of our work.

It's less well known that the free software movement, just like its predecessors, is a reaction to a process of enclosure. Richard Stallman, the spearhead of the free software movement, was a high school student when he discovered the "hackers", as they called themselves, at MIT's Artificial Intelligence lab, and became a welcome fixture there. Stallman and his friends had access to some of the first computers installed in universities, and they were fascinated by exploring them and working out how to make them do what they wanted. They created some of the first text editors, networking

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programs, and interactive games. The academic computing world was a small community of like-minded people, and if someone needed to fix a problem in a computer's software, he could walk over to Harvard and ask for a copy of the program's source code, so he could improve and reuse it. It came as a bucket of cold water when new systems started to come in without source code, and the manufacturers refused to share, meaning no one could run anything but the programs sold with the system, even if they were full of bugs.

Stallman reacted as commoners always have, by mobilizing in defense of his community's traditions, creating a clear articulation of the values at stake and launching a fight for their defense. He is founder of the Free Software Foundation ([www.fsf.org](http://www.fsf.org)), creator of a number of the most widely-adopted and perennial software tools in use, and inventor of the GNU Public License, an inspired piece of legal engineering that uses copyright law to guarantee that a creative work will be kept available to all to copy, give away, take apart, improve, and adapt for unforeseen purposes.

Source: Sam Williams, *Free as in Freedom: Richard Stallman's Crusade for Free Software*, O'Reilly Press, <http://oreilly.com/openbook/freedom/>

Stallman is emblematic of many thousands of people who have worked to defend free digital sharing and create new ways to share information, probably as long as the computer has existed. Computer files are very well suited to being shared freely, because it's easy to give away thousands of copies and still have just as many for yourself. The free software movement has become a more general "free culture movement" that shares books, magazine articles, musical compositions, movies, videos, cartoons, and anything else that can be published in digital form. (This newsletter is an example: it's available on the internet, and all the original content is legally protected not by traditional copyright, but by a free "Creative Commons" license that allows readers to rewrite and republish the text while prohibiting them from enclosing it against further free use.) In addition to creators publishing their work in

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## The World Social Forum: An Experiment in Pattern and Process.

By Lee Worden

*After years of protesting outside the annual World Economic Forum (WEF), a global gathering of heads of state, billionaires and celebrities, as well as outside meetings of the World Trade Organization, the G-8 nations, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and U.S. Republican and Democratic conventions, the international community of global justice organizers convened a visionary alternative to the WEF, named the World Social Forum. WSF is a "global open space" for meeting of movements and organizations based in many different languages, cultures and philosophical understandings.*

The first World Social Forum (WSF) was held in January 2001 in Brazil, with tens of thousands of delegates from social movements around the world present. The WSF is explicitly in opposition to neo-liberal economic policies (also known as the free trade agenda, among other names). Its organizing principle is that "another world is possible."

In an influential essay, *The World Social Forum and the Global Left*, sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes the WSF as a new social and political phenomenon — not an event, or a conference, not an NGO or a confederation of NGOs, not a social movement, not itself an agent of social change. It has no specific ideology nor program. It is not democratic or undemocratic. Nobody speaks in its name; it "*sees itself as a forum that facilitates the decisions of the movements and organizations that take part in it.*"

Is there any  
room for  
Utopia  
in our world?

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (BSS) argues that we are not in a time of adjustment within an ongoing history of progress, but rather that Western modernity is in its final crisis, in a time of paradigmatic transition. "It is characteristic of a transitional time to be a time of strong questions and weak responses." Strong questions "address not only our options of individual and collective life but also and mainly the roots and foundations that have created the horizon of possibilities among which it is possible to choose." Weak responses reflect the deep perplexity of the situation, but don't resolve it.

WSF is such an answer to two crucial questions. First: "*if humanity is one alone, why are there so many different principles concerning human dignity and just society, all of them presumably unique, yet often contradictory among themselves?*" At the root of this question is the verification, today more unequivocal than ever, that the understanding of the world largely exceeds the Western understanding of the world." Consider indigenous movements in Latin America, African traditionalism and Islamic insurgency: none of them sensible in the conventional terms of Western culture and epistemology (Western human rights is the "weak-weak" answer, while the WSF answer is a "strong-weak" answer).

BSS asks the second deep question: "*Is there any room for utopia in our world? Is there really an alternative to capitalism?*" After the historical failure of so many attempts at building a non-capitalist society, with such tragic consequences, shouldn't we look at the most for alternatives inside capitalism rather than for alternatives to capitalism?" Elaborating, he asks, "Is there no alternative to a world in which the 500 richest individuals pull as much income as the poorest 40 countries, meaning 416 million people, and where the ecological catastrophe is an increasingly less remote possibility? Is it to be assumed as an unavoidable fact that the problems caused by capitalism can only be solved by more capitalism, that the economy of unselfishness is not a credible alternative to the economy of selfishness, and that nature does not deserve any other rationality than the irrationality with which capitalism deals with and destroys it?"

Recent decades' predominance of neoliberal conservatism have pushed movements for justice and sustainability in two main directions: to yield to a centrism dominated by the right, and toward a left-leaning centrism. WSF offers a stronger response: "It takes the perplexity seriously, and strongly claims that there are alternatives. But it does not define the content of such alternatives ... Rather than referring to the conceptions that throughout the twentieth century conveyed the idea of an alternative society — socialism,

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## The World Social Forum: An Experiment in Pattern and Process.

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communism, developmentalism, nationalism — it insists that ‘another world is possible.’ *In abstract, this seems very little, but in the context within which it emerges it amounts to a utopia of a new type ... which consists in asserting the existence of alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation.*” Also: “The WSF ... aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of western modernity, many of which turned into conservative utopias: from claiming utopian alternatives to denying alternatives under the excuse that the fulfilment of utopia was under way. The openness of the utopian dimension of the WSF corresponds to the latter’s attempt to escape this perversion.”

We need an  
alternative  
thinking of  
alternatives.

WSF also succeeds at addressing a paradox of time scales: on the one hand there is a great sense of urgency about climate crisis, unclear threats, ecological collapses, widespread war and violence, the rise of despotism and extreme power inequalities, creating a sense that immediate action is needed or there may not be a long term; on the other hand, the sense that the change needed is deep and civilizational, calling for thoughtful and careful building — “that rather than taking power it is necessary to transform power.” WSF allows space for these two tendencies to be articulated side-by-side and be brought together in the same projects. Short-term objectives need not entail gradualist, reformist politics.

A great gap has emerged between the theory and practice of left-wing politics. Leftist theory is concentrated in the North and based largely on historical events in industrial nations, while contemporary movements in Mexico, Brazil, Africa and elsewhere in the so-called Global South, brought together at the first WSFs, have very little to do with that theoretical tradition, and revolves around entirely different concepts: territory, racism, starvation, cultural and sexual oppression, pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, rather than working class, democracy, socialism, human rights etc. “In this way, the WSF posed a new epistemological question: if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their worth for social emancipation is premised upon an epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the west, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North) thus allowing for a more just relationship among different kinds of knowledge. In other words, *there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.* Therefore, in order to capture the immense variety of critical discourses and practices and to valorize and maximise their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed. This means that *we need not so much alternatives as we need an alternative thinking of alternatives.*” ... “What is imperative ... is to start an intercultural dialogue and translation among different critical knowledges and practices: South-centric and North-centric, popular and scientific, religious and secular, female and male, urban and rural, etc., etc. This intercultural translation I call the ecology of knowledges.”

*“A new political culture that ... privileges commonalities to the detriment of differences, and fosters common action even in the presence of deep ideological differences once the objectives, no matter how limited in scope, are clear and adopted by consensus.”*

BSS continues his description; “In my view, the most salient features of the WSF’s contribution are, the following, without any criterion of precedence: the passage from a movement politics to an inter-movement politics, that is, to a politics run by the idea that no single issue social movement can succeed in carrying out its agenda without the cooperation of other movements; broad conception of power and oppression; network politics based on horizontal relations and on combining autonomy with aggregation; intercultural nature of the left and of the very concept of what is considered to be ‘left’ and, following from this, the idea of cognitive justice functioning as an important political criterion; a new political culture around diversity; different conceptions of democracy (demodiversity) and their evaluation according to transnational and transcultural criteria of radical democracy conceived of as the transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority relations in all fields of social life; combined struggle for the principle of insurgency vis-à-vis reform and revolution; sustained effort not to convert militants into

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new ways, illegal sharing of proprietary music, movies and software via the internet has become widespread, forcing corporations to go on the defensive and redesign their distribution strategies.

Since that time the digital world has changed drastically, and changed the rest of the world as it becomes an indispensable layer of social infrastructure. The Worldwide Web has made digital publishing a major global issue, and has also fostered the emergence of new forms of interaction, such as weblogs and wikis. A weblog (or blog), as readers will likely know, is a website with software that makes it easy for untrained users to publish short pieces of writing, something like a daily newspaper column. Anyone can create a blog, and today there are many millions in existence, some of them reliable and important enough that they have come to be considered authoritative news sources on a level with commercial newspapers. Blog writers are thickly networked together, and cite and respond to each other’s articles on a timescale of hours or even minutes.

Most websites are edited by their creators and read by visitors, like most publications, but there is a growing number of wiki websites - sites that are edited and extended by visitors. The most important example is Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), a collaboratively curated encyclopedia. Wikipedia’s encyclopedia entries are written and edited by unpaid readers around the world, who visit the site in their web browsers and make whatever changes to the encyclopedia they deem necessary. The English-language site has more than two million entries, more than *Encyclopædia Britannica* or any other encyclopedia, and its reliability has been judged about equal to *Britannica*’s by several studies (though those results are challenged by *Britannica* and others). Many other wikis are also in use, hosting collaborative production of texts from news reports ([www.wikinews.org](http://www.wikinews.org)) to scientific results (<http://qwiki.org>) and Star Wars trivia (Wookieepedia, of course — <http://starwars.wikia.com>).

Blogs, wikis and other new online forms of collaborative publication could not exist in the form they do without the free and open licensing

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practices innovated by the free software movement. These practices foster a culture of free speech, transparency, generosity and meritocracy. This culture is sometimes compared to the "gift economy" attributed to the native people of the current northwestern U.S. and to folk practices of freely sharing songs and craft techniques. This may be so, but it also makes sense to see it as an extension of the traditional practices of science: the work is done for the benefit of all, and published transparently to the world, to be tested, challenged and refined.

The innovations being incubated by online communities are now diffusing back into the practices of science. An *Open Access movement* has arisen in research communities, to make sure that the results of research are available to all, largely in reaction to the ballooning subscription prices of scholarly journals, which are forcing even major universities to make hard choices about which journals to collect. In 2008 Harvard University adopted a policy requiring all faculty's publications to be made available worldwide for free, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) adopted a similar requirement, mandating that all NIH-funded publications be made freely available to the public. Many other institutions are likely to follow.

(Harvard press release: [www.fas.harvard.edu/home/news-and-notice/news/press-releases/release-archive/releases-2008/scholarly-02122008.shtml](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/home/news-and-notice/news/press-releases/release-archive/releases-2008/scholarly-02122008.shtml))  
(NIH policy: <http://publicaccess.nih.gov/>)

The movement toward transparency and access is likely to continue and deepen. Researchers are beginning to adopt the wiki technology that has been so effective at enabling Wikipedia's creation, adapting it to the purposes of collaborative academic research and publication. Since anyone with a web browser can participate in a wiki, and the technology allows strangers to participate while minimizing the danger that they will damage others' work, this development has the potential to open up the academic process, weakening the barrier between the academy and the public, as the wiki form seems to encourage adopters to allow wider access to the collaborative process.

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functionaries; pragmatic combination of short term and long term agendas; articulation between different scales of struggle, local, national and global, together with an intensified awareness of the need to match global capitalism with global anti-capitalism; focus on transversality both in terms of themes and processes; broad conception of means of struggle with the coexistence of legal and illegal actions (barring illegal violence against people), direct and institutional action, action inside and outside the capitalist state; pragmatic conception of differences and commonalities, with emphasis on the latter; refusal of correct lines, general theories and central commands in favour of agreed upon aggregations and depolarized pluralities."

Needed; the  
work of mutual  
translation  
among  
and within  
movements.

WSF gives great importance to the rise of *de-polarized pluralities* and *intercultural translation*. Both liberalism and Marxism construct diversity as an obstacle to unity, while new movements treat all views as partial: "*No single theory or no single practice has the infallible recipe to conceive of another possible world and to bring it about.*"

The alternative to a general theory is the work of translation. Develop recognition, "contact zones" delineating what, for example, labor movements and feminist movements share and want in common. "Reduce to a minimum the conditions under which the acknowledgment of differences precludes the possibility of articulating and cooperating." "In this regard, the feminist movement is probably the most advanced, as illustrated by the conversations inside feminist movements in Latin America around community-based conceptions of liberation, prevalent among indigenous and afro-descendant movements, and individual-based conceptions of liberation, prevalent among western movements. It is imperative that the

WSF grant more priority in the future to the work of mutual translation among and within movements."

Closing: the 2009 WSF, which just occurred early this February, redefined its principles, declaring that neoliberalism has died with the global financial sector. It is now in opposition to capitalism. President Obama did not bother to go to the Economic Forum in Davos, a sign that it is no longer meaningful, and five countries' presidents came to the World Social Forum to pay their respects.

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*Boaventura de Sousa Santos is Professor of Sociology at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra (Portugal), Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School and Global Legal Scholar at the University of Warwick. He is Director of the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra and Director of the Center of Documentation on the Revolution of 1974, at the same University. He has published widely on globalization, sociology of law and the state, epistemology, democracy, and human rights in Portuguese, Spanish, English, Italian, French and German.*

*The point of critical scholarship is to question  
what is taken for granted.*

*Klaus Krippendorff*

# Democratic Experiments in Argentina

Introduction: by Lee Worden

A remarkable rupture occurred in Argentina in 2001. In the grip of a national financial crisis, with economic collapse looming, the government froze citizens' bank accounts, to use the money to secure payments it owed to foreign investors. Social movements that had been simmering against the government came to a head on January 19th and 20th, when citizens all over the country spontaneously came into the streets, banging pots and pans, and chanting, "que se vayan todos" (all of them out). The president, and the three who came after him, were forced from office within a two-week period. Having lost confidence in the government, remarkably, Argentines began to take governance into their own hands, forming neighborhood assemblies around the country, using formal consensus process to coordinate together, and arranging distribution of food and the rest of the goods they produced. *Following are passages from interviews with participants, from Marina Sitrin's oral history, Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina (AK Press, 2006).*

## Pablo, Asamblea Colegiales (a neighborhood assembly):

It was the night of the nineteenth. The middle class sat at home watching the news on television — seeing poor people crying, women crying in front of supermarkets, begging for or taking food — and the state of siege was declared. That's when the sound of the *cacerola* (the banging of pots and pans) began. From one window and then another, from one house and then another, came the sound of the *cacerola*. Television newscasters reported that there were *cacerolas* in one neighborhood and another and another until people realized that their individual reactions were forming part of a collective reaction.

## Ezequiel, Asamblea Cid Capeador (a neighborhood assembly):

I was very angry at my country and neighbors before this rebellion.... I'm one of the many people whose salary was cut by 13 percent before the rebellion. I couldn't understand why people weren't doing anything.... I was talking on the phone with my brother on the phone at the time... and then he heard the *cacerolazo*... It was like a wave that began to cover the whole city, and he said to me, "There's a strange noise and I don't know what it is." That minute, right then, I began to hear it as well, here in my neighborhood, so I hung up immediately and went out to the street. It was hard to believe what was happening. People were coming down *en masse* from buildings and making bonfires on street corners. What began angrily, with people coming out on the street in a rage, quickly turned joyful. People smiled and mutually recognized that something had changed. Later came euphoria. It was a very intense feeling that I'll never forget.

## Pablo, Asamblea Colegiales (a neighborhood assembly):

No one was obeying some ideological command. People simply met on a street corner in their neighborhood, with other neighbors who had participated in the *cacerolazos*. For example, in my assembly, in the neighborhood of Colegiales — and I know many other cases — someone simply wrote on the sidewalk, in chalk, "Neighbors let's meet here Thursday night." Period. Who wrote this? No one knows. In the first meeting there were maybe fifteen people, and by the next week it was triple that.

Group of compañeras, MTD la Matanza (an unemployed workers' movement)

### Compañera 1: It's about

relationships. I can disagree with her, but we still cooperate.

Why adopt another's ideas?

### Compañera 2: It's about horizontal consensus.

Compañera 3: We make a lot of decisions using consensus.

Compañera 2: But positive consensus, where everyone shares their opinions, not the false consensus where silence is taken as agreement. No, here you have to speak.

Compañera 3: Generally decision-making takes a lot of time.

Compañera 4: Yeah, totally.

[All smile, nodding agreement.]

Gisela and Nicolás, Elipsis-Video and Argentina Indymedia (an independent documentary group and independent media collective):

Nicolás: Remember when the barter network started in 1999? It was soon after that we were invited to participate.

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## Online Social Movements

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While the development of sharing and free copying online is fascinating and important, if it's a special case because of the ease of copying digital artifacts, these movements may not have much importance outside of the internet. There are important ways, however, in which these computer-aided explorations are a potential incubator for change in the regular three-dimensional world. For one thing, they are creating a new generation of artists and workers who find free sharing natural and necessary, who will bring this ethos to all their work, whether by working for transparency in local government or by publishing openly the design documents for the new energy technologies they invent. More directly, free culture practices can spread to non-computer applications, and this process has begun, for instance in the "Free Beer" culture, which trades publicly available recipes for home-brewed beer [see also the related excerpt from *A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution*, in this issue]. It is possible to discard the accepted rules of copyright, patent and trademarks, and freely exchange everything from organizational practices to chemical recipes, designs for machinery, or production processes for drugs and vaccines.

Many or most free and open-source computer programmers are paid for their work, though they give away the product. Some are employed as university researchers, while others are hired by corporations that have a particular need, while negotiating the right to give away the software they create in the course of the work. Participation in free culture is not necessarily an act of altruism, and there should continue to be just as easy a confluence of generosity and self-interest as the practices diffuse into new domains.

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*Communication  
is the interactive computation  
of a reality.*

*Klaus Krippendorff*



## Liberatory Economics

By Andrea del Moral

*Andrea del Moral performed in two cybernetics-related dance pieces, as part of Change of State Performance Project ([www.changeofstate.org](http://www.changeofstate.org)), at the 2008 ASC conference. This is an excerpt (lightly edited) from Andrea's book in progress on strategies for collective self-reliance. The passages printed here are from the chapter entitled "Liberatory Economics."*

In terms of material and economic security—now and in the long term—most of us are worse off than we used to be. Again: there is nothing natural about this. Our economic system was designed, and before it was designed it was hotly debated, and since its establishment people have created alternatives, and these alternatives have been violently stopped by the wealthy and powerful who benefit from the current designed economy.

We know that a better economic situation is possible—everyone over the age of 10 has lived it. But is a better economic system possible? Yes. History, even modern history, provides many solvent examples. The distinction between situation and system is important, because seeking a better system is different from seeking a better situation. To make a better system, we look at values, principles, and long-term goals. We think of multiple situations that could arise from the design. We aim for resilience against the situations we want to avoid.

Blueprints are futile for living systems. The central question that contemporary economic theory has to address is not "what is the best economic system?" but: "how can we begin towards a 'best' economic system that people can create and use practically?" This question originates in the tradition of dialectical philosophies, and has been employed by Hegel, Marx, Bookchin, and those in the field of second-order cybernetics.

Instead of blueprints, in this chapter I introduce five liberatory criteria by which to evaluate innovative social systems, including the economy. Systems, and beginnings of systems, that fulfill these criteria allow us to generate culture and infrastructure that offer the best chance at evolving into liberatory societies.

When we apply these criteria generally to distribution of materials, information, and services, we work toward a liberatory economic system.

We can also apply these criteria to more specific endeavors, such as a local

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**Gisela:** Yes ... It grew a lot after the nineteenth and twentieth of December. Before that, the bartering networks meant going to a fair to exchange something frivolous. After the nineteenth and twentieth, it turned into something for the basic survival of a family.

**Paula, feminist and GLTTB collectives** [gay, lesbian, transgender, transsexual and bisexual]:

The concept of power, at least in the leftist tradition, has always meant that to transform society it's necessary to take power... I had to laugh because after December 20th, when there were still many *cacerolazos* ... there was one ... with a lot of police repression. To escape this, we ran and jumped the fence to the Pink House [the Argentinian White House] and went inside. I was on television. They said that I was encroaching on the Pink House, that I was taking over the Pink House. I had to laugh. It's especially funny because at the time, my friend said, "We can go in there, but we're not taking power." To us, power didn't exist any more. The concept of taking power is archaic. What does it mean to take power? Power over what?

**Celeste, Clave Roja (an anti-capitalist student group):**

[F]or many people before the rebellion of 2001, the word "democracy" meant going to vote. Democracy meant that the military dictatorship wasn't there anymore.... Most people felt it was really important to have the possibility of voting, even if the candidate is someone you know will lie or steal, but it was still something really important. This changed recently—in December 2001. It seems to me that a lot of people, including me, have discovered another meaning to democracy, which is the democracy of the people.... When something doesn't seem right, people who thought that democracy happened with a vote will go into the street, bang pots and pans, organize, go to the neighborhood assembly.

**Paula, feminist and GLTTB collectives:**

I think the most important thing, with respect to the neighborhood assemblies, is that they've created a profound change in people's subjectivity. People who believed they were never going to do anything again, all of a sudden did. This is especially important considering our society, which teaches us that nothing done collectively matters, and that the only important thing is the individual. Just the fact that people have started to realize they can do things collectively is really important. They feel like if they can gather ten, twenty, or thirty people together, they can do something — they can change something, even if it's small. This, just this, is really important. This change is an extremely deep subjective change, because people are questioning this individualism that has been so entrenched in us since the end of the last century.

**Martín K., Asamblea Colegiales (a neighborhood assembly):**

Participating in the neighborhood assembly has changed my idea of what it means to think. Our culture, based so much in the individual, has made us believe that one person comes up with a new thought, names it, and it's theirs...

This struggle is revolutionary, but not the way people meant revolutionary in the 1970s. It's something else, and we still haven't named it, because it's not a revolution in the sense of bringing down the state. We have to create another world, build another world — think of how to organize this world, using a different logic. The logic of the state and the politics of representation are so entrenched in the market that, together, they have taken away our tools for social change.

We're creating new ways of relating to one another. No one knows exactly how to do it. It's a collective process. No one's going to come and tell us how to do it, and it's exactly this process that is so beautiful.

... [I have started] to experience relationships in a different way. This transformation has to do with going from a type of passive satisfaction — a comfort in waiting for someone else to give emotional things to me — to something more active, and trying my hardest not to wait for someone else to do it. It's this idea of taking an active role

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in things, in our relationships, and the construction of our world in our everyday life that has affected me so profoundly.

## Afterword

Rebecca Solnit reports (LA Times, Feb 8 2009):

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-solnit8-2009feb08,0,3267788.story>

*While the United States was inaugurating its first African-American president, Icelanders were besieging their parliament.... People beat pots and pans in what was dubbed the Saucepan Revolution. Five days later, the government, dominated by the neoliberal Independent Party, collapsed, as many Icelanders had hoped and demanded it would since the country's economy suddenly melted down in October.... The big question may be whether the rest of us, in our own potential Argentinas and Icelands, picking up the check for decades of recklessness by the captains of industry, will be resentful enough and hopeful enough to say that unfettered capitalism has been monstrous, not just when it failed, but when it succeeded. Let's hope that we're imaginative enough to concoct real alternatives. Iceland has no choice but to lead the way.*

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*We must understand that  
we are one with nature.  
It is not that there are various parts  
flying around in the universe.*

*The essence of our idea  
is that we are a unity.*

*One emerges from the other,  
and the other emerges from one.*

*And that is a starting point  
that I too try to express:  
I conceive myself to be part  
of the world.*

*Heinz von Foerster*

## Liberatory Economics

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housing plan, health policy, or food system, as I do in the chapters that follow. We can use these criteria to guide us anywhere humans interact: an ensemble theatre company, charter school, water supply, global environmental policy, investment firm—anything. They are basic criteria, broad enough—and important enough—to use everywhere.

These liberatory criteria are most useful if you share three fundamental assumptions:

- 1) Capitalism inherently contradicts meeting basic needs, social health, and ecological health, including the grand scale of the survival of civilizations.
- 2) People have the right to participate in making decisions that affect them. People who are directly affected tend to become the most informed. It makes sense both ethically and practically then, that people make decisions in proportion to how much they are affected by them.
- 3) Socially speaking, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Groups can do more than a gaggle of individuals.

A liberatory economic system meets five criteria. Three of them are intrinsic; one is responsive to the current system, and one deals with the vital question, "Sure, but how?"

The *intrinsic criteria* are:

- 1) democratic decision-making,
- 2) accounting for and creating well-being in social and ecological systems,
- 3) recognizing that the collective good increases individual well-being.

The *responsive criterion* is: 4) intrinsic anti-capitalism, and the "*how*" *criterion* is: 5) sustained participation.

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*The logic of the world is the logic of the descriptions (of the world).*

*Perception is the computation of descriptions (of the world).*

*Cognition is the computation of* 

*Heinz Von Forester*

## Transforming Vicious Cycles into Virtuous Ones:

*Healing Trauma and Opening Doors  
to Social Change*

*By Mordecai Ettinger*

*Mordecai Cohen Ettinger, a social justice activist and organizer, has been engaged in social justice work for the last 13 plus years on multiple fronts from queer/transgender/intersex liberation, to eradication of the prison industrial complex, to Palestine solidarity work. After several years of community organizing, it became clear to him that for a just future to be possible, internal healing and transformation must happen in a dynamic, sustainable relationship with the anti-imperialist anti-racist work we do collectively in the world. Thus, he gained skills as an alternative health practitioner and engaged in graduate research through the lens of ecology, examining the relationship between healing socially inflicted/inter-generational trauma and social change. He is currently a trainer, a somatic practitioner focusing on trauma resolution, and a financial/organizational development consultant for community-based and social justice organizations.*

In ecosystems, including human communities, many processes are facilitated by feedback. The more resilience a system has, the greater is its capacity to withstand stress. A system exposed to more stress than it can manage will alter from a state of relative homeostasis to vicious cycles eroding the integrity of the system, like a polluted pond that can no longer support wildlife and leaches toxins to the soil and surrounding water tables.

In the context of human ecology, overwhelming stress is trauma. Defined in western psychology only recently in response to the symptoms of Vietnam war veterans, trauma in the human realm can be understood beyond the narrowly defined violence and torture of war. In the context of social change, trauma can best be understood as the ongoing and inevitable byproduct of systematic oppression from colonization to globalization and all of their supporting structures.

According to the Resilience Alliance, the extent to which an ecosystem or integrated human system can self-organize, learn and adapt is dependent

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## Democratic Experiments in the Globalization Protest Movement

*Excerpts from David Graeber, Direct Action: An Ethnography  
(forthcoming, AK Press)*

*[Lightly edited from the manuscript in progress, for grammar only.]*

*By Lee Worden*

Campaigns against the IMF, WTO, and against the neoliberal project in general were, as I observed earlier, extraordinarily effective in changing the terms of political argument. On the eve of Seattle, in 1999, there was almost unanimous agreement among opinion-makers in the US that ever more “free market reforms” were the only possible direction for any economy; internationally, the “Washington consensus” as it was called remained almost completely unchallenged, and neoliberal policies were treated as the inevitable face of globalization. Speaking as someone who got involved in the movement right after Seattle, I can attest that just about no one involved imagined that in a mere year and a half, this ideological apparatus would lie, effectively, shattered, and that even magazines like Time and Newsweek would be running editorials saying we were right. We thought it would probably take a decade. (Of course, we also thought it might lead to profound, revolutionary social change: this didn’t happen.) Obviously, this was more the work of activists in the Global South than of those in Europe and North America but it was the very fact that the movement was, in fact, global that made it so effective. Still, for all the movement’s effectiveness in conveying its negative message—that neoliberal policies are massively destructive—it proved almost completely incapable of conveying its positive message—particularly its call for new forms of direct democracy....

Perhaps more than anything else, this is a movement about creating new forms of democracy. One reason why the media has been able to largely write off the so-called “anti-globalization” movement as an incoherent babble of positions without any central theme or central ideology is, precisely, because its ideology is embedded in its practice. In conscious contradistinction to past revolutionary groups we are not going to come up with some abstract party line favoring “democracy” and then turn ourselves into a well-oiled authoritarian machine dedicated to seizing power wherever possible, so as to someday, eventually, be able to introduce it....

Coming to a decision is just the final step. If one respects the process, the ‘spirit of consensus’ as some like to say, the exact form of that final step is not all-important. And anyway, it’s not like the minority is really being compelled.... I spent a lot of time trying to understand what this ‘spirit of consensus’ was really all about. It was clearly not just about decision-making. It wasn’t even just about conduct during meetings. It was more an attempt—inspired by reflections on the structure and flow of meetings—to begin to reimagine how people can live together, to begin—however slowly, however painfully—to construct a genuinely democratic way of life.... Popular conceptions of democracy in the contemporary United States could be said to revolve around two concepts: “choice”, and “opinion”. Both are words that, significantly, are almost never used in consensus decision-making. Democracy, one constantly hears, means that people get to make choices.... Almost always, though, they themselves have played little or no part in shaping the things between which choice is made. It’s this ideology of choice of course which makes it possible to see democracy and the markets as equivalents: consumer choice, as well, means selecting from a range of options designed by someone else. It seems to me the conception of “opinion”—personal opinions, public opinion—also follows from the absence of any real experience of participatory decision-making....

Let me map out what I take to be the salient features of consensus-based decision-making. First and foremost, consensus is a way to reach decisions that would be consistent with a society that does not employ systematic violence to enforce decisions. It is an attempt to find a moral formula that could maximize individual autonomy and commitment to community at the same time.... So my first suggestion is that we look at this as if we were dealing with a political ontology that begins with the assumption that actions, and not objects, are the primary reality. If so, I think the rest falls fairly easily into place:

1. Any consensus group—whether a tiny affinity group or a vast network—is based on founding principles. These principles tend to refer to what the group does, or hopes to accomplish (its “purposes or reasons for being”) and how it organizes

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- itself to go about doing it...
2. The assumption of diversity. Once the focus is on common action, rather than agreement about the nature of some higher Truth or set of definitions or correct analysis, it becomes easier to see how a diversity of perspectives can come to seem a strength rather than a weakness....
  3. The ethos of mutual solidarity, as observed, combines an emphasis on individual autonomy with commitment to others. The assumption here is that individual freedom is not the absence of commitments or entanglements, but rather, that it largely consists in the freedom to decide for oneself to which projects or communities one wishes to commit. From the perspective of the group, one might argue ... that just as those who are treated like children will tend to behave like children, the best way to minimize selfish, spiteful, duplicitous, or petty behavior is by effectively daring people to be mature. By granting each member of the group the right to block, one forces each to be keenly aware that they could throw the group into havoc at any point. This, and the refusal to apply moral pressure, makes it extremely difficult for anyone to cast themselves in the role of the victim or to tell themselves they're only doing what they have to to win a pre-established political game.

Any activist who has any experience with work in the corporate sector—and this is the overwhelming majority—is likely to be able to expand at length on the profound difference between the styles of human interaction typical of work environments, and activist projects. Those new to the scene tend to talk constantly about newfound feelings of liberation, solidarity, freedom, trust, and so on. I have heard some talk about physical symptoms that suddenly vanished—asthma, chronic headaches, and the like—or of overnight recovery from chronic depression. The contrast with the world of work is unsurprising. Work is, after all, both where most adult Americans spend the majority of their waking hours, and where they have their most regular experience of hierarchical organization—in particular, where they have to deal with those with the power to issue them commands.... I'm not sure there's a single recorded example of a stateless society that made decisions through some sort of majority voting system. Small-scale, autonomous communities almost invariably employ some variation on a consensus system.... in local village assemblies in rural China, for example, elders almost immediately objected [to majority voting] on the grounds that, if proposals had to be voted up and down, then there would be winners and losers, and certain people would be publicly humiliated and lose face. In general, in local groups, it is much easier to gauge what the majority wants to do than to figure out how to convince the minority who disagree to go along with them, and holding a public contest in which that minority is seen to lose is probably the worst way one could go about it....

**David:** Actually, that's one of the things I really like about consensus process. In majoritarian politics, you're always trying to make your opponent's idea look like a bad idea, so the incentive is always to make their arguments seem stupider than they really are. In consensus, you're trying to come up with a compromise, or synthesis, so the incentive is to always look for the best or smartest part of other people's arguments. **Chris:** I'd write "creativity". Some of the most beautiful examples of consensus I've ever seen have been when everyone seems at loggerheads, you have two different proposals and there seems no possible way to reconcile them, it's starting to look like the group's divided 50/50 and everyone's starting to dig in their heels, and then, suddenly, someone just pops out with a completely new idea and everyone instantly is like, 'oh, okay. Let's do that then'.

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*... one can see the emphasis of feminism in the whole direction of the movement. "Situations" do not create themselves. There's an enormous amount of work involved. For much of human history, of course, what has been taken as politics has consisted of a series of theatrical stages, and dramatic performances carried out upon them; one of the main gifts of feminism to political thought has been to continually remind us of the people who are in fact making and preparing and cleaning those stages, and even more, maintaining the invisible structures that make them possible—who have, overwhelmingly, been women. The normal process of politics of course is to make all these people disappear. One might say that the political ideal within direct action circles has become to efface the difference; or, to put it another way, that*

## Transforming Vicious Cycles

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on resilience. Trauma erodes resilience in human systems and becomes a key causal condition diminishing individual and collective capacities to cooperate, self-organize, meaningfully connect with others, and maintain the social cohesion necessary for vast social change. Thus, as in all self-reinforcing feedback patterns, systematic oppression is inherently traumatizing and trauma inherently inhibits our capacity to challenge and transform trauma and oppression. However, feedback is never unidirectional and any vicious cycle, such as the one described above which plays out in our daily lives, can be transformed into a virtuous one.

Recent studies in neuroscience increasingly indicate that one way to increase resilience on a human scale is through working directly with the body. Thus, in the last ten to twenty years there has been a boom in somatic therapy and related practices. Somatic therapy refers to a wide range of healing systems, some of which integrate and expand upon traditional psychotherapy and some of which depend more on a combination of touch, and dyadic and group exercises, which centralize the body ('soma'), body awareness, and mind-body integration in healing and recovery.

The underlying mechanisms of somatic therapy are still unknown. However, in psychology as in physics, observation changes a phenomenon. Through simple body awareness of states, sensations, or behaviors, states can be shifted or enhanced. These shifts however, are not just temporary, but through synaptogenesis, the formulation of new neural patterns in the brain, these shifts can be permanent. Somatic work is particularly suited to gently and slowly working through difficult states such as the overwhelming emotions often indicative of the flight/fight responses which characterize trauma. When an individual's or a community's resilience is reduced, it requires less stress to cause a person or collective to move into a reactive state. Somatic therapy helps create new patterns to foster increased resilience and new capacities.

These new capacities, such as an increased ability to manage anger, anxiety or intimacy, are crucial to cooperation and sustainable social cohesion, the conditions required for

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## Transforming Vicious Cycles

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strong movements. While Marx and other leftists modeled their ideas of social change on the science of their times, contemporary leftists have the opportunity to look towards new sciences to understand the processes of change. The relationship between individual healing and collective social change is essential to the new paradigms currently available to the left.

Through somatic practices and tools we can explore more deeply our in-born biological capacity to create change, both individually and collectively.

## BOOK REVIEW

### From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism

By Fred Turner, *University of Chicago Press, 2006.*  
Reviewed by Lee Worden

In the early 1960s, students in Berkeley's Free Speech Movement marched wearing IBM punch cards hung around their necks, insisting that people must not be treated as abstract bits of data by a dehumanizing administration symbolized by its computers. By the mid-90s, the computer was being portrayed as a revolutionary tool with the power to free people from bureaucratic constraints and bring about a new era of democracy and free speech all over the world. Historian Fred Turner asks how this curious about-face came about in this deep, complex, and meticulously researched book, and he traces it to a series of moves made by one particular group of people: the writers and publishers associated in various ways with the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

The *Whole Earth Catalog* appeared in 1968, offering "access to tools" intended for denizens of the new communes that were appearing around the country as the young counterculture

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## Creating Criminals

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### NOTE

*Language: This article uses the words 'criminal', 'crime' and 'victim'. Please note that these are relative terms — for example, killing a person is generally considered illegal (murder) while killing a person under sanction of the state is legal (execution). The terms used are for convenience for the purposes of this article and should be interrogated when used in practice. Also, 'punishment' — an action taken to address the future — is considered in contrast to 'consequence': the outcome of a past action.*

### INTRODUCTION

During the 2002 ASC conference, graffiti was found on the wall outside the conference space. An all-participant meeting was held, where many thoughts were put forward. At one point, an elder member of the organization asked: "What was our part in creating an environment such that this would happen?"

The common perception of crime is one in which the observer makes no connection between herself and the crime, the criminal, or the construction of either concept. This perspective could be considered a first order cybernetics approach. In contradistinction, second order cybernetics would recognize the observer as a (recursive) element in the system being observed — that is, anyone naming a criminal or crime is part of the self-creating system in which such elements exist. This article asserts that such a view is a tool in creating a more socially just world for/with all its participants, a desire assumed of its readers.

### The Criminal System

In the idealized first order view, laws are clearly defined and universally applicable. A person can be recognized as violating a law because such violations have been described in advance. (In practice, at times the criminal has even been described in advance, e.g. racial profiling). Once recognized as committing a crime, a person's identity is then reduced to 'criminal' (further noted without quotes) and is thus subject to criminal justice, where, in order to prevent further crimes, the criminal is punished through one of a variety of pre-determined means that are particular to the crime (not to the criminal nor the victim). The backbones of this process are laws (social agreements backed by the force of government), and their support mechanisms, the law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

In this case, one apparently need only match a person's actions to the pre-described crimes, apply the pre-determined punishments, and voila! The criminals will disappear, leaving a crime-free system. Of course this does not happen in practice, and has never done so.

### PARTICIPATION

The criminal system operates on the premise that it is criminals who perpetrate crimes, and by addressing them through punishment, further crimes will be prevented. In doing so, it relies on numerous instances of non-participation, voluntary and otherwise.

In creating the criminal system, participants (us) delegate the definition of crimes (to lawmakers), the recognition of the crime and identification of the criminal (to police), and the punishments (to judges, and at times, juries). Additionally, in order to function, the criminal system simplifies those involved to a set of individual criminals and victims, overlooking the influence of the community on the crime and the effects of the crime on the community. In doing so, the social relationships involved are reframed away from interpersonal accountability. Of important note: in this model, crimes are not committed against people, but against the criminal justice system, which responds according to its structure, regardless of those involved.

Because a crime is, in effect, against the state, not the people involved, the victim, whether as individual or community, has no role in the criminal justice process. The criminal system provides no avenue for restoration to the victim, locating their experience as secondary to the sanctity of law. As a related consequence, the failure to recognize a relationship between the criminal and the victim and provide a channel for communication between them eliminates a key feedback loop to the criminal as to the effects of her actions. With no feedback, the criminal has little opportunity to respond

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## Creating Criminals *(continued from previous page)*

to anything except the punishment — creating an ineffective system of restitution, which must be actively maintained to function, in contrast to a self-generating one of cooperation and understanding (restoration) as means to influence the criminal's behavior.

### RESPONSIBILITY

“To act responsibly, then, means to care for someone else and, at the same time, to reflect on the consequences of what one is doing in relation to the circumstances in which does what one is doing.” (Poerksen, in conversation with Maturana, *From Being to Doing. The Origins of Biology of Cognition*, Humberto Maturana and Bernhard Poerksen)

The criminal system considers only the criminal. It does nothing to address, in Maturana's terminology, the structural couple the criminal participates in: the society in which she lives, to whom she was responding to by doing the crime. Such oversights not only inhibit responsibility in the observer, but also preclude it in the criminal, assuring the ineffectiveness of its punishments, which fit the crime, not the criminal, the victim or the society in which they live.

The criminal system obscures the helpful view that a social system [the sum of individual acts (such as those of you and I) over time] creates both the criminals and the crimes for them to commit, under the influence of social power dynamics such as those of class, race, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. For example, a hungry person taking food from a trashcan is a criminal because of the sovereignty of ownership, a value we support in many daily ways. In this context, most members of the system fail to recognize their part in its construction, distancing themselves from responsibility and consequently from agency.

In a system where crimes are distinguished in advance by people unassociated with the criminal or victim, where the criminal is recognized most for her transgression against laws rather than the people and communities she has affected, and where those affected by a crime are disallowed participation in the criminal justice process, the potential for responsibility is effectively eviscerated. How then, to shift to an orientation where we can hold ourselves and each other accountable for the social world we co-create?

### ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE/CONCLUSION

One of the key offers of the criminal system is that it creates the appearance of cause and effect acting in an independent reality. The choices a person makes are seen as individual isolated actions, and the consequences of those are seen as solely their responsibility. This view isolates the individual from the social system, and distances the observer from participation — their accountability and agency — while supporting practices that devour natural and human resources, with nominal success with regard to recidivism and other markers of success in the criminal justice system.

Alternatively, we could view ourselves as participants in a structurally determined social system of structurally determined systems (including people) using coordination (decisions made in light of, and ideally by, those affected) instead of laws. We can attain far more desirable outcomes with regard to community health and safety using any number of restorative justice models including Circle Processes, Victim-Offender Reconciliation, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, Peer Mediation, Neighborhood Councils, Community Conferencing, Alternative Dispute Resolution, all of which have been consistently shown to be more effective than the criminal justice system, measured against its own benchmarks.

Embracing a more complicated model than one of linear cause and effect would mean not having answers at our fingertips. Shifting perspectives may take a period of uncertainty, and in our current climate of competition, uncertainty can seem a risk. Therefore, such a shift will take a decision that doing so is worthwhile. This is a very personal decision — and therefore a very social one, cutting deep to concerns about how interlinked the well-being of others is with our own.

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*[Questions to seed discussion and further resources  
are available on the new-patterns wiki  
<http://new-patterns.wikispaces.com>]*

## BOOK REVIEW

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left the city to raise goats and the children of the Age of Aquarius. Sequel catalogs appeared on and off until the late 90s, and it spun off a series of magazines: *Coevolution Quarterly*, and later *Whole Earth Review* and *Whole Earth*. When *Wired* magazine was created in the 90s to promote the new dot-com culture, it was helmed by a clique of former *Whole Earth* staffers. Somewhere between those two moments was a radical shift not only in the cultural meaning of the computer, but in the meaning of idealism and the legacy of the 60s counterculture.

At the center of Turner's account of this history is his thesis that the Whole Earth community created a hybrid vision of technology's potential, by bringing together the cross-disciplinary, ad-hoc exploratory scientific culture of the cybernetics community with the young hippie homesteaders looking for new ways to live and new forms of consciousness. By juxtaposing discussion of low-tech construction techniques and meditation with the ideas of Wiener at MIT and Bateson at Stanford (and most prominently, Buckminster Fuller), the *Catalog* gave legitimacy to the communalists' experimentation by associating it with the cutting edge of science and technology, and simultaneously gave new legitimacy to the ideas of cybernetics by recasting them as a means of deep, positive transformation of society and consciousness in line with the dreams of the 60s. In making this synthesis, Turner holds, they brought about a new vision of technology as a countercultural force for revolutionary change. This is, of course, the vision of technology that was presented to us in the dot-com boom, though its values were more or less diametrically opposed to those of the 60s counterculture in general. By the time of *Wired*, the communalists' rejection of the American way had given way to an embrace of flexible corporate entrepreneurship, all the way to including right-wing icons Newt Gingrich and George Gilder — both featured in *Wired*, advocating their version of Reagan's ideology of pro-free-market governmental deregulation.

I was a child of the counterculture, born in 1969 and raised in the woods north of San Francisco. I grew up reading the *Whole Earth* magazines,

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and I pored over them, hungry for everything from detailed discussion of how to do maintenance work on a passive solar cabin, to the first critical review of the Gaia hypothesis, and between the lines, how to live outside the mainstream in a proud and confident way. It was because of the connections between science, technology and world-changing values that they represented that I chose to study computer science and system theories as a college student (the latter independently), and later ecological theory.

I believed in them, but I couldn't believe in the dot-com program. That was a brutal betrayal of people for money and false hopes. The early internet was a free, experimental place with deep transformative potential, and it was sold out for quick cash, with the ex-Whole Earth writers cheering the way and cashing in. The dot-com economy nearly destroyed the San Francisco area's working-class, people of color and bohemian communities. It has been grossly destructive to the planet: microchip fabrication is a highly toxic processes that consumes a huge amount of fresh water. It requires a great deal of long-distance shipping, and the waste products can not be safely disposed of. The parts are made by sweatshop workers who are underpaid and overworked, who are often abused, and whose bodies are often ruined by the work. Additionally, the dot-com boom was the wedge for a new era of flexible business organization in which every worker is disposable and must live by their wits or perish. Instead of acknowledging these problems, the dot-com champions, led by *Wired*, insisted that the personal computer and the internet were the gateway to a new world of freedom and egalitarian empowerment.

Growing beyond college age, I have become more critical and aware of the deep flaws in the *Whole Earth* project that existed from the beginning. From the first *Catalog* which proudly claimed Fuller as its patron saint, it identified tools (i.e. technology) as the means to change the world — a deeply individualistic vision that utterly fails to account for the need to deliberate together and contest with one another, to stop bad choices from being made and dismantle harmful institutions

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# ASC News

## FEBRUARY 2009

The new administration elected last year became the ASC's board on January 1st. At a (skype) meeting that day, the new board appointed Arek Fressadi to the position of Treasurer.

The nominations committee has found suitable candidates for the many posts the society offers, most recently generating a slate of candidates for trustee which have now been elected. The committees required by our constitution have also been put in place.

### **Officers**

**President: (Ranulph Glanville):** [asc-president@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:asc-president@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Vice President: (Elizabeth Simpson):** [asc-vice-president@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:asc-vice-president@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Secretary: (Thomas Fischer):** [secretary@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:secretary@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Treasurer: (Arek Fassadi):** [treasurer@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:treasurer@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Will act as finance officer until a treasurer can be elected.**

**Vice-President Membership (Philip Guddemi):** [Membership@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:Membership@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Webmaster (Randall Whitaker):** [webmaster@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:webmaster@asc-cybernetics.org)

**Past President (Louis Kauffman):** [lkauffman@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:lkauffman@asc-cybernetics.org)

Members will remember the Society's extra-ordinary good fortune in having Rebecca Hibit as Treasurer. She played a vital role in restoring the society to the state it is in at the moment, working far beyond the call of duty. She took on many of the responsibilities of Membership VP and Secretary, as well as her own responsibilities as Treasurer. Following our elections last year, one elected candidate dropped out, and Rebecca agreed to continue for the moment as Treasurer. Towards the end of the year she reminded us that she had private projects that required her attention and confirmed that she would no longer be available as an officer. We were fortunate that, when we wrote to the membership asking for candidates to take on the role, Arek Fressadi offered, and he was appointed Treasurer by the board at its skype meeting on January 1, 2009. The board, and indeed the whole Society, owes Rebecca an enormous debt of gratitude.

Arek has provided this biographical note: Arek Fressadi was introduced to cybernetics when he was retained by the Cosanti Foundation to prepare the development and financial plan for Arcosanti in 1983. <http://www.arcosanti.org/> His business background spans construction, real estate, management consulting and international finance. He has consulted ENR 400 companies and government agencies in organizational design, productivity, and strategic planning. As assistant to the Attorney of a French Trust, he held specific power of attorney to arrange financing for transactions up to \$500 million. Arek was formerly a Registered Investment Advisor licensed by the Security Exchange

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Commission, and a NASDAQ General Securities Principal. A licensed contractor since 1974, Arek has been involved in the design and construction of high-rise office suites, shopping centers, industrial buildings, apartments, medical centers, schools, power plants and thousands of homes in various capacities.

### Trustees

The Society's Trustees had not been refreshed for some time. At the start of this year we endeavored to put this right. Through the outstanding work of our Nominations Committee under Pille Bunnell's chairing, a remarkable new group of trustees were elected by the Society for a period of 6 years. (Another cohort will be elected in 3 year's time.) Our new Trustees come from within cybernetics (and are well known in the society), and from outside. It is my hope that the new Trustees will bring both support and breadth to the Society, particularly through their connections, and through their interest in what we do. They are:

**Robert Hoffman**

**Ray Ison**

**Michael Lissack**

**Albert Müller**

**Karl Müller**

**Paul Pangaro**

### Conference:

You will already know about the forthcoming conference organized by Arun Chandra in Olympia, Washington, March 12 to 15 (see <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2009/index.htm>). The theme is "Cybernetics - Talk - Dance - Anticommunication". Keynote speakers include past President Lou Kauffman, Susan Parenti from the School for Designing Society and Tom Moritz, Director of Public Programs at The Internet Archive. I hope to see you there. It promises to be an exciting program in a beautiful setting, and I believe there will be a lot of creative work done.

The board will be meeting at the ASC conference, to be held in Olympia WA (see <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2009/index.htm>). The conference promises to be exciting and full of interest, with the usual cultural events that we have come to anticipate, through collaboration with the Performers' Workshop. One focus will be to celebrate the work of Herbert Brun.

The board is seeking to continue the processes of renewal that began during Lou Kauffman's presidency. We are working on our management and outreach; and also on the content we offer members. (if every mem-

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(such as racism, male dominance and corrupt governments). It carried on Fuller's technocratic idealism, which counts on a benevolent, all-knowing class of engineers to design world transformation — which is exactly the dot-com era's vision of social transformation. This simple faith in the power of rationality and good will is touching but ultimately destructive. It has brought us atomic disasters and nuclear waste, climate-changing emissions, toxic air and water, impending ecological collapses, looming global economic depression, and technologies that keep us under surveillance, make us work faster and longer, and give us instant access to numbing, pointless products. It is not enough to encourage everyone to develop new tools and make their visions into reality. We need to evaluate together what futures are acceptable and what needs to be rejected. We need transparent, candid disclosure of the values behind our visions, and a way to stop elites with disproportionate access to resources from imposing decisions that make life unbearable for the majority of the world.

That said, I think there's a great deal of value in the work the *Whole Earth* writers did, of connecting the scientific project of modeling whole systems to values of communitarian living and social revolution, and Eastern philosophy and psychedelic transformation of consciousness. I believe, or at least I want to believe, that making those connections is very important and necessary. As it happened in this history, the valuable insights of system theory and ecology were joined to an uncritical promotion of technology, faith in progress, and a hopelessly idealistic conception of social change, and the whole project ended up corrupt and destructive. It's not too late to make a synthesis of technically advanced knowledge and human-scale social transformation without falling into these traps. We can rise to the challenge, if we choose to.

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ber persuaded two new members to join each year, we would soon be a healthier society)

There are several moves afoot, including developing a mission/vision statement. A questionnaire, "Observing Cybernetics", developed with the College for Exploration, has had a trial run and results will be presented at the conference. We expect to send the questionnaire to a much wider range of participants including all ASC members, shortly thereafter.

All this achievement is made possible, as many of you know through your own contributions, through huge voluntary effort by many people, all of whom are fighting to keep the notions of cybernetics alive, and to promote them. The board is grateful to each and every one of them.

There are more details on all these, and other, items below.

### ASC Vision/Mission:

I have prepared a short statement which is posted for consideration and discussion by all ASC members. Members (only) are invited to send any comments by email to ASC-MEMBERS@yahoo.com

The mission of the ASC is;

*to become main source and point of reference for cybernetics: for knowledge, for (gaining) qualification and for people*

*to continue to develop understandings of circular systems in which investigator is involved and each change affects all.*

*to act with commitment, co-operation, generosity, responsibility (according to the manner of a second order cybernetic ethos)*

*to reflect second order cybernetic understandings in to our actions.*

*to develop the highest academic standards appropriate to our field• to extend our outreach: to find fit with others, build connections, links to other sub-*

*jects (both current and historic), including developing the cybernetic coalition*

*to maintain breadth of interest and modes of exploration and expression, including the sciences, art and performance, and philosophical implications*

*to encourage sensitive utility, in the form of an appropriate relationship between theory and practice*

*to bring in new blood: focus on the new men and women (while celebrating the old)*

I will be grateful for your comments, corrections, extensions and clarifications. Please send them to ASC-MEMBERS@yahoo.com

### Projects:

The board is beginning to build a portfolio of ASC projects. Clearly the cybernetic resource mentioned above is one project. There are others being developed. We will discuss these at the conference, but we also invite projects from the membership. Proposals should take the following form, so we can clearly see what is involved. We are interested in ideas that come with plans for implementation\_\_ For too long the ASC has promoted ideas without any consideration for how to bring them to fruition.

Project name

Description

Person responsible

Resources needed and available

Status

Due Dates

Notes

### Observing Cybernetics:

This is one project already under way, and is how the cybernetic resource is being initially developed. Our member, Jason Jixuan Hu raised the possibility of an ASC involvement in a Cybernetics 101 course—that is, an Introduction to Cybernetics course. After discussion, mainly involving an informal group of the

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interested, in Stockholm in November, we decided we should not set up a particular course, but rather build a resource which could provide base material for any author wishing to set up a Cybernetics 101 course. This will allow individuals to use this resource in a manner suitable to their needs. It can also provide an arena for the discussion of those cybernetic topics that interest individual members, thus providing a forum for the development of ideas between members.

The first step in this has been a trial questionnaire prepared by Peter Tuddenham and Tina Bishop (of the College for Exploration) and reviewed by Pille Bunnell and myself. Initial findings will be presented at the Olympia conference, after which the questionnaire may be revised and sent to a wider group, first and foremost among which are ASC members. The outcome will provide us with a starting point from which to develop this resource.

We are lucky that Peter and Tina approached us. They have a long term interest in cybernetics and systems, and have much experience in working with groups with common and central areas, who often do not communicate enough about these areas including oceanographers and geologists. You can find out more about them on their web site: <http://www.coexploration.org/>

### **In conclusion:**

Through its projects and the vision/mission statement, the Society is developing a collection of actions, and plans for how to enact them, that is coherent and which can build together to strengthen both the society and cybernetics.

Although there are many matters to be improved, the management of the society is in better shape, and we have a full collection of officers and trustees.

Our 2009 conference is on course, and plans for the conference in 2010 are already well advanced. The ASC was a major contributor to the planning of, and a leading participant in, the 3 day workshop of the Cybernetic Coalition in Vienna, 2008.

This is due to the enormous effort put in by all concerned, an effort which I hope will encourage members to respond actively in proposing projects, improving the vision/mission, inviting in new members, and generally in their involvement in and enjoyment and development of what the society is beginning to offer, in any and all appropriate manners.

Not least of those contributing currently to the ASC is Barbara Vogl. This news appears in her final issue of Patterns, the newsletter she founded, that we found an affinity with and later came to claim as our newsletter. (see p.2) Barbara has worked tirelessly for PATTERNS, and has become an important friend both to the society and to many members. Her energy, integrity and enthusiasm have been of great importance and we shall miss her—or at least her newsletter. We will celebrate her retirement from this task at our conference—another good reason to be there!

*Finally, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Lou Kauffman. Lou was at the helm in a difficult period when all sorts of previously unrecognized problems were discovered—and we started to sort them out. His great empathy with people and skills in responding to them was a major factor in keeping the team who worked on this focused and working together.*

*His moves towards other societies have placed us in a good position with other groups, and his personal contribution to cybernetic thinking remains a signpost for us all. Luckily we do not lose all of this as he moves to his new post as Past President.*

February 19th, 2009

Ranulph Glanville

[asc-president@asc-cybernetics.org](mailto:asc-president@asc-cybernetics.org)