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Globalism, Tribalism and Autonomy

Peter Lamborn Wilson and Konrad Becker

August 1995

Peter Lamborn Wilson and Konrad Becker are having coffee on the occasion of Alpbach Technology Forum 95 on Networks in Tyrol, Austria, August 1995

Konrad Becker: You had been in Forum Alpbach 95. What is your impression of an alien coming to this Tyrolian village in that point of time and space?

Peter L. Wilson: Well, since you put it that way, I was alone for half an hour at one point and – I shouldn't say this – I smoked and I was looking at the valley; I was sitting in a hotel that had a view that looked over the valley and watching the way the morning mist was going circled around the valley, very slow marvelous ghosts going around. And I remembered that the last time I was here I'd gone to the museum and saw the Hallstatt collection. So I know that the Celts came from Hallstatt, which is somewhere near Salzburg, and that they ended up in Ireland, and so suddenly I had a sort of vision of Celts going through this valley on their way to Ireland from Hallstatt.

And later I asked a guy who studied the prehistory of this region, whether that could be, and he said absolutely, this is

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exactly where they probably went. So I really liked the valley. Alpbach village was like a postcard, very self-conscious, very touristic, and once you get out of that Alpbach village it's wonderful. Sort of like Switzerland but not so neat and clean; like Switzerland with wildness. And at the same time the wonderful thing about the landscape is, that it is shaped by human culture of, who knows?, four thousand years minimum. So that even though it's wild it's also in a sense soft. And the sort of combination of wildness but many thousands of years of human culture making a kind of ...- so it's very Chinese, a feeling of a Chinese landscape thing from the Sung dynasty. So — that's so much for Tyrol.

The conference feels like something old and finished. The reason why I was there, was to try to recapture some of that, whatever it must have been like in the 40's, when people like Adorno, Heidegger, Feyerabend and Popper were there. There were three interesting groups — one group was on tribalism and globalism and then there was the cypherpunk or cryptography group, and the consciousness or psychedelic group, but the other five groups, I can not even remember what they were. They were incredibly bureaucratic and boring and stupid: Something about highways and jobs in the future, I mean any subject could be interesting, but judging by the summaries, that we were hearing on the last day: this was government, bureaucratic old businessman.

So I guess the idea was to get some hot topics in there, so that there could be some cross-fertilization, but there couldn't be any fertilization, because each one of these workshops was at the same time and separated. So we couldn't go to any of the other workshops and none of the other workshops could come and visit us. The audience could move around. But it remains to be seen whether this produces any kind of cross-fertilization for Austrian culture, cause nobody was talking to anybody else. Morgan's friends of course — we all know each other or wanted to know each other so we hung out together.

K.B.: You were not introduced to each other by the administration?

P.L.W.: No — not at all. Nobody thought to try to bring us together socially. I mean there was one buffet supper, but there was nobody moving around saying come on I want you to meet the Nobel prize winner or taking the Nobel prize winner and saying come on I want you to meet Albert Hoffmann. It didn't seem to me that there was any attempt to cross these groups. So they were like strange weirdos and Austrian bureaucrats and never these groups came in contact with each other.

K.B.: What about the audience? Was there a clear distinction between people who follow the traditional boring seminars and ...

P.L.W.: I think so. The people I talked to were moving amongst our three workshops. And they had nothing to say about the other workshops. Those of the people who were talking to me.... maybe ten people. Our group was — what was the name of this guy?

Mr. Lendvai. Right, he was the chair person and there was Jude Millhon (St.Jude) and me, we were the anarchists. And then there was Sir Colin McColl who was the former head of MI6 which is like the CIA of England and Eric McLuhan who is the son of Marshall McLuhan and John Gage who is the head of Sun Computers, a 6 billion dollar man.

Actually Sir Colin was great, the British spy, everybody loved him, he was charming and unpretentious a real gentleman and perfectly willing to talk about his work from many different points of view — really a very pleasant person and smart.

McLuhan, I also liked him as a person but it was kind of strange that he was having the Marshall McLuhan philosophy. It was the air of his father, representing the global village, the medium is the message, everything — brought up to date for the Internet. I mean McLuhan's media theory is still very useful on a certain level but I actually found myself — and also

Jude thought the same way — to disagree on almost everything he said. For example: He painted a picture that people get the wrong idea about the global village and that McLuhan never thought that it was a good idea. Of course I understand this. And then he went on to say that the village is a very constricted place and there are no individuals in the village, that everyone is prying into your business and so on. That global, I think in his mind, means urban culture where one is a true individual or whatever.

So obviously this is not my take on the situation. I pointed out that in the paleolithic era the tribes person is not saying to itself: “Oh I wish was in Paris !”. In its true form the tribe with the village is a self contained cosmos — the tribe is the cosmos, every tribe is the whole cosmos. ... It’s not true you can’t be an individual in this situation. And the cosmos has room for everybody. So if you are an intellectual then you become a shaman, if you are an artist you might become a maker of spoons or painter of the outside of the tent or whatever. If you are a violent son of a bitch you get to be the war-chief, when there is a war. And if there is not a war everyone make sure — keep that guy out of trouble. There is room for every kind of marginal person in the tribe. It’s not true that the tribe is restricted or the individual.

K.B.: It touches this aspect that it is very hard to disappear in a religion or in a tribe but it is very easy to disappear in a crowd.

P.L.W.: Sure, that’s why I live in NY I mean I understand what you are saying. The point is, it’s true for the modern world where the village or the tribe is in fact under attack by the center. The little village in east Tyrol or wherever — if any intellectual was born in one of those villages of course he would move to Vienna — no question about it. Because this village is under attack from Vienna. Vienna sucks out all its energy, takes all the tax money. I mean I assume this is true, because it’s true in every other country I have ever been in. So I am simply using

Of course since 1989 all sorts of things have changed since the death of the evil empire, lots of little evil empires, evil kingdoms to make up for the one big empire that is no longer there.

America doesn't have the money or the political strength to be the head of the one power in the world — it thinks it does and a lot of people think it does but it doesn't. Up to 1971 people owned money to America, since 1971 America owns money to — I don't know the national debt.

And the truth is America is churning up out of its subconscious, political subconscious, churning up all these enemiesfilthy Arabs, crazed terrorists, kiddy porn on the internet and all this — choose your favorite symptom, some symptoms are noticed by people of the right, some symptoms are noticed by people on the left but the subject is pathology. And there is a pathological search for the scapegoat, the enemy, and naturally a society like that is waging war on itself.

Vienna as an example. I say that Iran is an example. Teheran just sucks all the money and energy and all the artists, intellectuals. And anyone got to be nineteen years old and had two ounces of brains — went to Teheran.

So the village is a bad place to be now, because the village is under attack. On the other hand there is of course a reaction against this. People are leaving the city and not wanting to go to the suburbs, because the suburbs that's a failure, a historical failure, and so they go to the village. As someone also pointed out, with the net you don't have to be so isolated in the village. It's not the same as having a brilliant coffeehouse where you can go and meet all the people and really interact in the real world. But it's something anyway. I know people in Wisconsin, Wyoming or places like that who have gone back to the village but they are on the net — a sort of "satisfactory balance" between what the village is good for and the village is not good for. Anyway that was one aspect that we covered. We didn't really focus very well, and that was the fault of the chair person.

I think that a different moderator would have just allowed the flow to go anywhere, maybe something interesting would come out. It wasn't a bad group but he had this idea that we had a subject we had to talk about — globalism, tribalism.

I talked about those Zapatistas as a tribe doing something very postmodern and I talked about the Winnebagos in Wisconsin that I happened to have some knowledge about. A tribe of Indians who have a casino and make a lot of money so instead of spending a lot on booze they got organized and they have a 100% employment in their tribe and they are using the net — Their language has never been a written language so they are using the net to become literate in their own language. So they are leaping over the whole imperialist alphabetical stage of literacy and jumping — maybe, I don't know — over the whole industrial age into the postindustrial age in some strange way. So the net can be very good for tribal activists.

And these Zapatistas are also very much represented on the net. They don't put it up themselves, because they don't have the machines, but people in Mexico City will do it and translate all their stuff into English — instantly the same day that it came out -and put it on the net. So the North American press wasn't doing shit , wasn't covering the story at all. If you wanted to know the story you had to go into the net. That was interesting. The situation is going on in Mexico. I don't know what's happening with the net. I mean now the books are coming out, some serious assessment of what is going on, but for a few weeks the net was the only source, in North America. On my radio show I was putting as much as I could on the air.

Since I didn't get to the other groups I'm not exactly sure what they did but the consciousness group had Alexander and Ann Shulgin. He developed MDMA (Ecstasy) and he has done a lot of work with drugs. Albert Hoffman and his wife were there, very charming marvelous people. Very strange to meet the guy who invented LSD, considering my life — sort of like meeting Jesus or something, who turns out to be this nice Swiss gentlemen who puts back the Schnaps like a twenty year old.

Ruth Inge Heinze the expert in Asian shamanism and also very knowledgeable about Buddhism and other subjects — very nice lady who teaches at Berkeley.

Then there was the cryptography panel with Eric Hughes who is one of the founders of the Cypherpunk movement. Whitfield Diffie who invented public key cryptography and John Perry Barlow, an old friend of mine. So we had a great time — socially. We had three dinners together, very nice.

K.B.: You were in one of the more politically related groups there?

P.L.W.: Yeah, unless you think of highway-administration as politics.

It would be interesting to see what the ORF (Austrian State TV) put on the air. They were making videos of the three workshops.

free to be what they wanted to be as groups. You don't have to like David Koresh's ideology, he was a crackpot and probably a dangerous crackpot. But for example he wasn't a racist. A lot of liberals in America just assumed that he was a racist, it's not true. There were Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, all kinds of people in that compound. They assumed that he was a fundamentalist, but that's not exactly true. He was a believer in the Book of Revelation which is not at all the same thing as being a fundamentalist like one of these television preachers. It's a whole different religious universe. Most of the liberals are not prepared to understand this.

These are not really evil right winged bastards these were a bunch of religious weirdos and they wanted to be left alone, basically to be weird -by themselves. And this is what outrages a lot of people in America.

The Oklahoma bomb — The first thing they said: the Arabs! within in a couple hours out was the word: white Americans! The whole overground press, Time magazine, NYTimes, all the editorials and articles they went : White people hate the government?! We didn't know that. Bullshit ! — there are millions of people. White, black, yellow, red, you name it out there in America who are completely dissatisfied with whats going on. But they don't vote. They are not part of the economy. And people who are falling out of the boundaries of the middle class, which is a classic situation for the emergence of some form of fascism. At the moment it isn't fascism precisely, it's more like confused populism, which could go either right or left, take alliances to the right and the left. It doesn't necessarily have to be racist and reactionary.

I know plenty of anarchists and people on the left who are extremely upset about Move and Waco. They are not just upset about Move, because of the black people, they are not just upset about Waco, which is as I said before, not white people anyway. They are just upset — upset that this kind of thing happens in America.

So the immediate assumption about Oklahoma is that we won't get the true story and we haven't got into the true story. And there are a lot of strange things about it for example the second perpetrator. I may have the details with the story mixed up so I'm not presenting myself as an expert in the case but as I understand it a second figure was arrested and then immediately released on orders of the military.

So in a sense — yes I think there is a vogue from all this stuff into, maybe not a new theory, but into new applications of theory, or maybe a new theory. The idea that paranoia is not necessarily a form of madness, but it could be a form of criticism. So from that point of view this is already a well established part to a theory and definitely important. I don't have any theories about conspiracies in connection with Oklahoma or Waco it's just very apparent to anybody that we are not getting the story. And I'm sure that the Waco story is not going to emerge, everybody is certain that the truth is not going to emerge except for 10% rich white males who vote and actually run the country and at least pretend to believe it :Yes the truth will come out.....

But if you are black — there is the whole Move story, in Philadelphia. Mumia Abu Jamal is about to be executed for.

He was a member of Move and he was also a journalist in a radio show in Philadelphia and he was not actually charged with a crime in connection with Move, the burning and bombing at Move. He was charged with killing a policeman. It's a very, very bad story.....

If he is going to be killed it is to show that the government was justified in blowing up a lot of black women and children, burning down the whole neighborhood in Philadelphia, simply because these people were autonomous and rude, everybody agrees they were really rude, but the point is that they were autonomous. The point about Waco was that they were autonomous. Whether we agree with these groups or not is not the issue. The issue is that they were behaving as if they were

K.B.: Is there anything like a new political theory emerging from the US? What is the role of Noam Chomsky? Did you see his movie?

P.L.W.: No I did not. I do not think Chomsky is making a major contribution in theory. I don't see him as the American Baudrillard or something — no. And I think he conceives his own function in a different way — he is a watch dog. He gets information and passes it on. He had this obsession about getting information on certain subjects in a way where other people don't have the time or don't have the money. He's a tenured professor at MIT. His usefulness will never cease in that respect. He has worked as usefully as anybody, any shade of left or dissident. I know he is an anarchist, he even said this a few times in print, but he doesn't talk about anarchist theory which is too bad, because a lot of people would respect him or could learn something from him.

K.B.: What are the effects of US subculture politics entering the mainstream, popculture conspiracies and the like?

P.L.W.: Well, a number of points. First off all — each of these subjects we are talking about had a movie. Chomsky had a movie, conspiracy had a movie, that stupid, idiotic JFK film, and unfortunately a lot of Americans believe that if you get a movie or five seconds on the evening news now you are visible, but I don't think this is true. I'd like to know what Chomsky thinks about this, whether he feels he got anything out of this movie. Did it put his message across to more people really, for more than ten minutes? The Crumb movie for example, which I also haven't seen but I heard that Crumb was horrified, he wishes he had never done it. So it is not doing him any good, it is just making his life miserable, people tracking him down. The movie apparently makes his whole family look like really insane people. So crazy people are after him now. All the conspiracy people said: "Ah, at last... we've made it into the public discourse!" — as if there is a public discourse and three months later... nothing, back to where it was before.

The spectacle if we can still use such a word is very eager for anything that will give of anybody ten minutes of increased heart rate and glandular flow and they eat it up and shit it out.

Again this goes back to our subject whether to disappear or not: wouldn't it be better in the long run not to make this appearance? Because the result is, that everyone thinks: o.k. that's over, we've done that and so anything which comes above the surface and enters into this pseudo discourse of the media — that's it, that's the end. When everybody is talking about something, that means it's dead. And ten minutes later it really is dead and nobody is talking about it anymore. So wouldn't it be better in the long run not to make these appearances, these pseudo appearances — wouldn't it be better to make a real disappearance than a pseudo appearance? Well anyway, that is a question.

K.B.: Do you see a convergence of mythology and politics?

P.L.W.: Well, on the mythological level all the stuff is working but that has a relationship with the media which will be very complex to try to track in detail.

Well every once in a while these mythological memes also make their appearance in the media as well . And in that way some of them can be killed, if you know what I mean. But the source, the unconscious storehouse for all this stuff is never emptied — are never empty. The human consciousness or imagination.

And all the more so, because it penetrates into a world which still believes in the rational, in unified consciousness, in history — in the negative sense that I would give to that word. In other words we basically are still living, despite the romantic movement, despite modernism, in the 18th century.

In this respect the public discourse is assumed to be rational, assumed to be secular, separated from religion through some quasi-linguistic fiction. These mytho-memes are not received in this world of pseudo sunlight in a religious sense anymore, the way they would have been in the past, let's say in the 17th

century or going on back to the stone-age. When they make their appearance they don't appear in the world of religion, they don't appear in this recognized separated sphere of spirituality. They penetrate everything including the secular consciousness. For example: satanic abuse, the UFO, abductions...

These things make an appearance in the rational media and people talk about abuse and they get panic stricken and they don't know why they get panic stricken. Because we are now anti-modernist, not postmodernist.

Anti-modernist in the sense that for example Freud has been chucked out of the window and we don't deal with the unconscious any more. That only happened for a few years. Maybe in the 40's, 50's, people tried to deal with the unconscious. A lot of people — fascinating stuff came out of that. And now that's finished. A friend of mine said we don't need the unconscious, we have advertizing. Now we don't even have advertizing so much, even advertizing is finished. So whatever this unconscious is — I mean it's sort of spread out in supermarket newspapers, home videos, mallculture..... and basically a lot of this stuff does not appear and can not appear and will never appear in the media, in a sense, it's too freaky. There are some things that the monster can't eat.....

K.B.: Conspiracies seem to make it on prime time TV these days. O.J. Simpson, The Fu Man Chu/Shoko Asahara thing, Oklahoma Bombing, Waco...

P.L.W.: That reminds me to go back to what we said about if we ever get the true story. I think that the point is that nobody really trusts the media — we are used to hear that people don't trust politicians. I think it's gone to the point now, on an unconscious level if not on a conscious level, no one trusts the media, with obviously very good reasons because all we have to do is spend a lifetime plugged into the media. And no — this is not real live and if you can't think that consciously you simply can feel it on a cellular level.