

MUTUAL AID AND MUTUAL TRUST

In the Introduction to his timeless classic, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, Peter Kropotkin wrote, "[A] lecture 'On the Law of Mutual Aid,' which was delivered at a Russian Congress of Naturalists, in January 1880, by the well-known zoologist, Professor Kessler, the then Dean of the St. Petersburg University, struck me as throwing a new light on the whole subject [of 'survival of the fittest']. Kessler's idea was, that besides the law of Mutual Struggle [nature red in tooth and claw] there is in Nature the law of Mutual Aid, which, for the success of the struggle for life, and especially for the progressive evolution of the species, is far more important than the law of mutual contest."

In *Mutual Aid*, if I remember correctly, Kropotkin does not speak explicitly of mutual trust. But certainly in a human society where mutual aid is practiced there must also prevail a high degree of mutual trust. Those of us committed to building a humane and truly compassionate world, where all people will be able to live with dignity, must work to achieve mutual trust. We need to recognize it as an essential characteristic of our emerging global grassroots infrastructure. We should also recognize how difficult it will be to attain. Why is that?

Mutual trust will not come easily because we live in a culture, worldwide, in which mutual distrust is deeply embedded. The institutionalization of distrust reaches into almost every aspect of our lives, as a few moments of thought reveal. In all the institutions

of the dominant culture -- government (executive, legislative and judicial branches), mass media, corporations, universities, colleges and schools, advertising and public relations, sports, agribusiness, the medical, insurance and pharmaceutical industries, religion, banking and investment firms -- calculated deception and outright lying are so clearly the prevailing practice that there are myriad attempts to prevent it, all of them ineffective and quite generally recognized as being futile.

A few examples of ineffective countermeasures make the point. Advertising is not only for the legitimate purpose of informing people about the availability of various products and services, but also to falsely claim benefits to the purchaser, in order to promote useless sales. So there are 'truth-in-advertising' laws intended to protect consumers. All governments lie. There are 'truth commissions' to unearth the facts. Corporations lie about what they have (and have not) done to prevent environmental destruction, and to safeguard so-called workers' rights. There are 'environmental protection agencies' and 'labor laws'. Prosecutors and judges lie. There are 'judicial review procedures' to safeguard (ha! ha!) the rights of the Chicago Haymarket Martyrs, of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, of Ricardo Flores Magon, and, in our own enlightened time, of Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu Jamal, to name only a few victims of the 'justice system'. Students 'cheat' and lie. Colleges have rules against students plagiarizing. It's phenomenal, the amount of lying. Naturally, in this social environment we all learn to be distrustful, and we all learn to lie.

WHY DO PEOPLE LIE

You've probably heard it said, about someone who apparently lies effortlessly, that so-and-so is a "born liar", as though it was a particular genetic attribute rather than something that had to be learned. Of course that's not so. No one is born a liar. Clearly, from the very beginning of its life an infant is embarked on a miraculous search for understanding -- everything -- a search to comprehend the world of which it rapidly gains consciousness. Long before it can verbalize, long before it can decipher the sounds of speech, it discovers, much to the pleasure of adults, that it can smile and that its smile invariably elicits smiles in return, and human warmth. And it learns to cry. You have only to watch a small baby held by a parent or other familiar person if its eyes suddenly discover you in its field of view. With its eyes rivetted upon you, the intense, unabashed scrutiny to which you are subjected is one of total curiosity, a focused effort to understand you. The child tries to fit you into its perception of the universe. Clearly, at this stage, a small child is nothing if not totally open, totally honest.

At a later stage of childhood, each of us learned that people say things that are untrue, and we learned that we could sometimes benefit, for example by avoiding punishment, if we denied the truth. THE MOTIVATION TO LIE IS ALWAYS THE SAME, TO GAIN SOME PERCEIVED BENEFIT. The immediate consequence of a particular lie may be entirely insignificant, or it may be disastrous. But the pervasiveness and universality of lying has the cumulative effect of making everyone, when no longer very young, distrustful. That is a

catastrophic circumstance of our lives. That is why it will be so difficult to build mutual trust within our global grassroots infrastructure. We need to recognize how enormous the task is, and also how vital it is that we succeed if we are ever to build the kind of social order we want.

BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST

The only way to get rid of the pervasiveness of lying is to get rid of the motivation. Lying will become obsolete only when it no longer offers a perceived benefit. Obviously that won't happen in the overall society for a long time. What we can do is to begin with ourselves in our own organizations, in our relationships with one another. The elementary unit of trust is trust between two people who, over a longer or shorter period of time, come to know each other well enough so that each has confidence in the truthfulness of the other. They both know that when they agree on something, it is truthful, not feigned, agreement. And when they disagree, it is honest disagreement.

In our grassroots groups there are, necessarily, many discussions about what course of action to pursue. When disagreements occur, as they sometimes do, resulting in prolonged, intense arguments, we must be honest about our motives, even if they are difficult to admit, even and especially to ourselves. Many of us, perhaps most of us,

have been wrongly conditioned to think that our personal esteem rests in part on our ability to prevail in an argument. We may have been participants in school or college debates, where winning an argument, not finding the truth, is the objective, as it is for lawyers. Thus, winning an argument can be psychologically important to us, and it may not come easily to acknowledge, OK, I guess I was wrong. That's a psychological impediment to being honest, because it motivates us to look for other 'reasons', not because we think they are good and valid reasons to consider but because they may help us win the argument. Using dubious reasons in an argument can generate distrust of us. Such mutual distrust exists in many sectarian political groups, where it can lead to fragmentation and dissolution. Building mutual trust within our grassroots groups will not be easy, but we need to make the effort. And we need to succeed.

In the larger society the task of eliminating the motivation for lying is, in truth, although this may at first seem to be an overstatement, equivalent to that of achieving replacement of capitalism by a completely non-exploitive society, one that is non-hierarchical, in which the use of coercive power is at an absolute minimum, a society of mutual aid that meets the basic needs of everyone, where human rights are no longer advocated, simply because they are everywhere the norm, taken for granted and no longer thought about. In such a society, admittedly utopian, there will be no reason to lie, no benefit to be gained by it, no secret activities to be hidden by lies. And trust will be reestablished. Although it is utopian, we ought to recognize that in the long run it is the only viable alternative to the brutal horrors with which the 20th Century ended and the 21st is beginning.

An enormous amount of education, not the conditioning of our minds by the institutions of the dominant culture that passes for education, but true education, will be necessary before the larger society will be able to progress in doing away with the rampant inequalities and injustices that motivate most people to lie. True education must stem from the efforts of ordinary people to learn from each other, from true grassroots initiatives. It cannot come from privileged élites, most of whom are more concerned with maintaining and rationalizing, that is, lying to themselves about their status than in understanding the true source of their privileged circumstances and the cost to less fortunate people caused by the inequalities that the dominant social groups maintain, inequalities of which they are the direct beneficiaries.

TRUSTING IN THE NEED FOR A DIVERSITY OF EFFORTS

In the last note of this series I wrote,

I think it would be romantic, and probably fatal to our aspirations if we relied only on massive demonstrations against global capitalism, and failed to build simultaneously a new kind of 'community', that is, a real, conscious, geographically dispersed grassroots infrastructure. It seems to me that in order to succeed, it will be necessary to continue a vast number of efforts, which can be roughly grouped as follows:

- 1) massive demonstrations and/or other actions that publicize the widespread condemnation of global capitalism;
- 2) development of an in-depth global grassroots communications infrastructure;
- 3) development of the other parts of a global grassroots infrastructure, and the transfer to it, to the greatest extent possible, of resources of all kinds, removing them from corporate and governmental control and thereby 'hollowing out' the dominant structures.

I promised then to give reasons why I think all three groups of efforts are needed for our ultimate success.

1) Massive demonstrations, if widely publicized, and honestly reported, make many people aware of the breath and depth of popular opposition to the rampage of global capitalism. They reveal the nation-states using iron fists to suppress true citizen participation in the economic and political processes that govern our lives. They show the reality of calculated police and military brutality, often to the shock of people who see it in the open, where they live, for the first time. Despite their great cost in energy, time and money, the demonstrations also catalyze replacement of these resources, by attracting more participants and by their positive psychological impact on those taking part. They also offer prime opportunities for educational and organizational efforts, as the preparatory work for the recent protest in Quebec (in April, 2001) demonstrated. Despite the fact that they are actions taken 'on the

turf' usually controlled by ruling-class power, rather than in localities where day-to-day on-the-ground struggles give us a better chance to gain immediate limited goals, they are actions of massive defiance, psychologically important for our collective sense that we are not acting in isolation.

2) Only when the great majority of the world's people are truly united by a shared understanding of the destruction being wrought by capitalism will we be able to gain control over our own lives. Our ability to educate ourselves, to raise our level of understanding, and to do it on a global scale, depends critically on our possession of a global grassroots communications infrastructure. To truly understand the world we must free our minds from manipulation by government and corporate-controlled media. This will take a massive effort, using all forms of communication media, an effort that is happily already well under way, as described earlier in this series.

3) Real power to control our lives depends upon possession and use of resources of all kinds. Right now this power is almost entirely in the hands of giant capital, exercised directly by corporate capitalists and the nation-states, which serve them. In contrast, we, the overwhelming majority of the world's people, have almost no say in countless matters that affect our well being. Our power to effect change, to gain real control over our lives, will come only through our gaining possession of, and freedom to use more and more resources. We must build our own infrastructure. And we must fight to hold on to it, and to use it as we decide. We must not let corporate

interests destroy the Pacifica Network. It must remain a part of the grassroots infrastructure. We must not let giant capitalists like Banamex destroy our ability to maintain websites for authentic journalism, true grassroots journalism un beholden to corporations, governments or wealthy foundations. Al Giordano's struggle to save his NarcoNews website (which he recently won against Banamex) and the broad-based struggle to save Pacifica, are exemplary. Information about these fights, the first one already successful, the second one ongoing, is at:

(for NarcoNews) <http://www.narconews.com/>

and (for Pacifica) <http://www.pacificacampaign.org/>, and

<http://www.progressiveportal.org/discussion/pacifica/>

We need to go far beyond building the global grassroots communications part of the infrastructure. We need to develop our infrastructure to include, eventually, all the resources we require to sustain ourselves. This will be a vast effort, taking as much ingenuity as we can muster to find myriad ways of transferring wealth from the corporate infrastructure into our own. In the long run this effort will yield the power to end corporate control. It will spell the withering away of capitalism. I believe the effort to build our infrastructure is at least as important as the giant demonstrations we are now seeing in opposition to global capitalism. In a subsequent note in the series I'll describe some things I did, small-scale but potentially effective if widely adopted. Of course that only scratches the surface of the mountain of possibilities.