

Winter 1991

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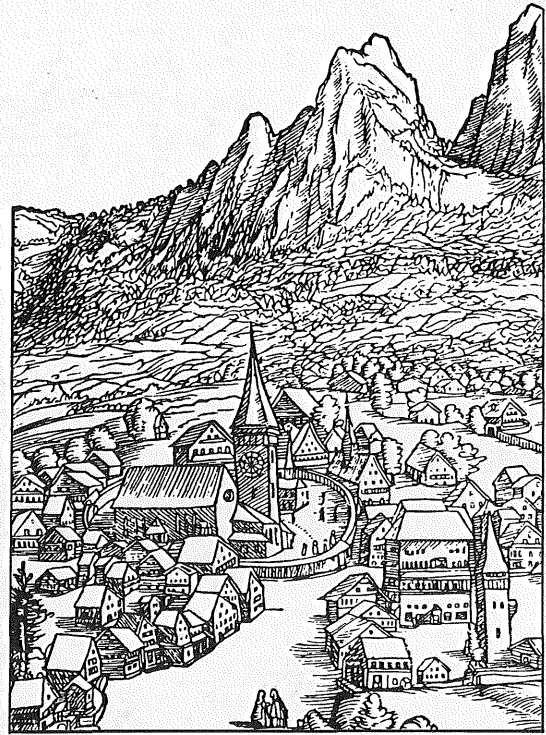
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# RAIN

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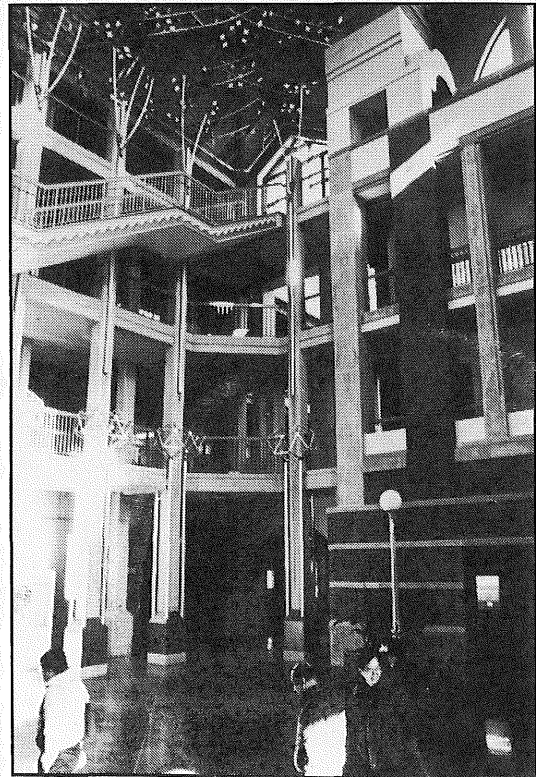


The Natural Economy of Laos



Swiss Origins

The Oregon Experiment Revisited



## Decentralized Politics



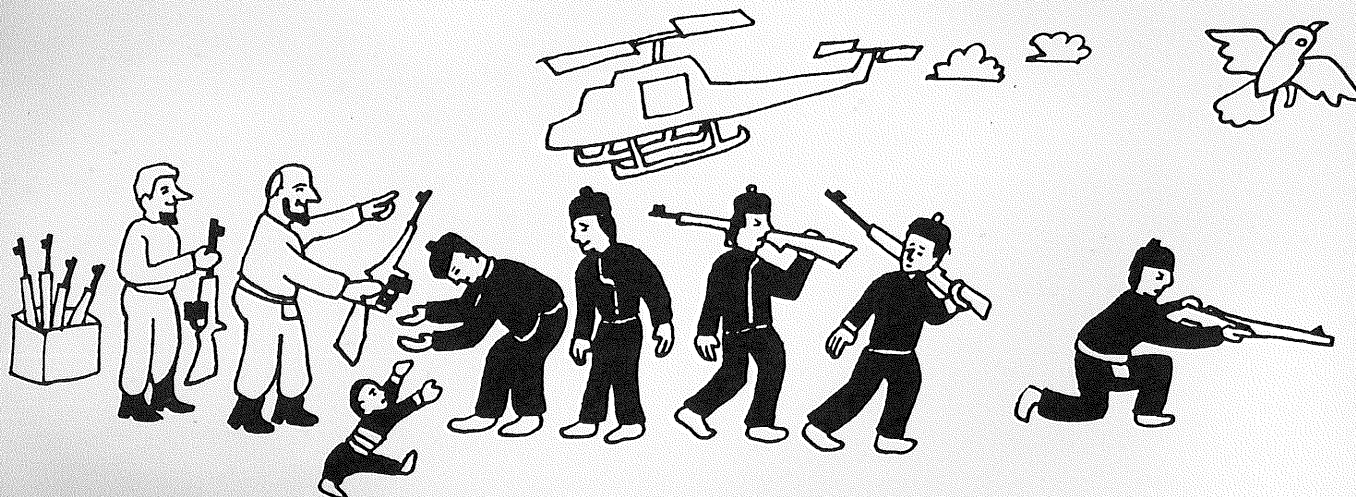
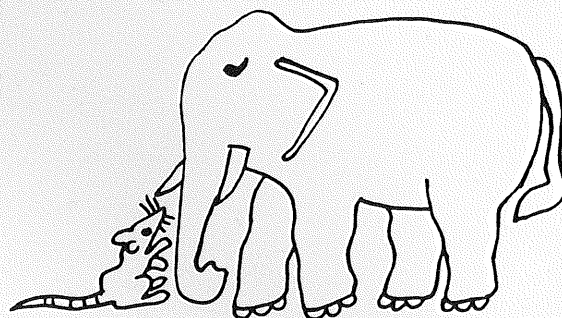
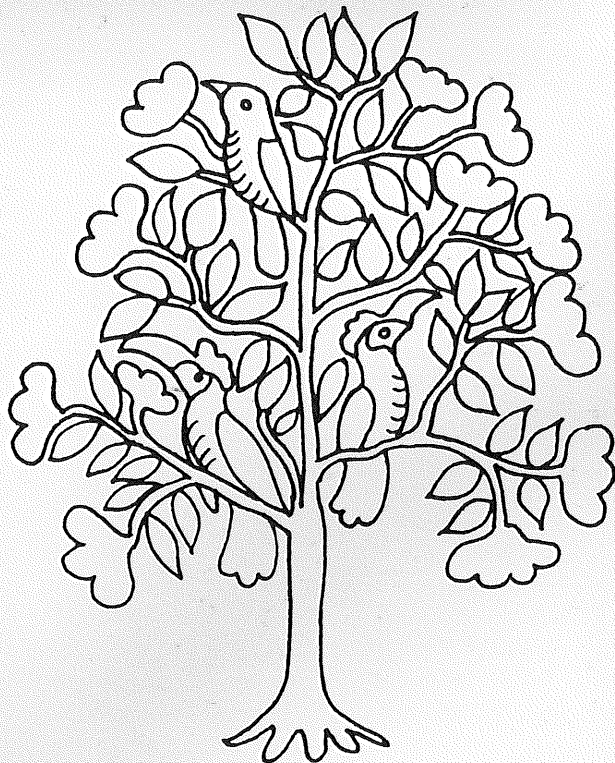
# In This Issue...

We use the phrase "decentralized politics" here to describe systems where decisions are made as close as possible to the people effected. In Laos this political body is the family, although many problems are solved by the cooperation of families in a village. In Switzerland, the primary political unit is the town, but the Swiss had to fight for this independence from the Holy Roman Empire. In the Oregon Experiment, committees are formed within a University community to represent broad concerns.

Political decentralization, or local independence, is an answer to the abject failure of both Capitalism and State Communism to provide solutions for their people. Both these systems are products of the modern, massive nation-state, and both suffer from enormously destructive concentration of power in corporations and institutions. Both systems are natural propaganda machines, the one offering "freedom" and the other "collective ownership". In reality they both provide for total dependence on decisions made far away from the people served. It is extremely sad that these nation-state ideologies have now competed for our attention for so long that alternatives to both are rarely discussed.

The idea that small economies and polities are more efficient and humane than large ones can be traced back at least to Aristotle. Jefferson and Gandhi also held these views. It has also been clear since the 19th century that nation-states shift resources in ways that are ecologically stressful. But political structure cannot be totally abandoned for reasons of stability: solidarity or confederation among small independent regions is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of particularism and isolationism.

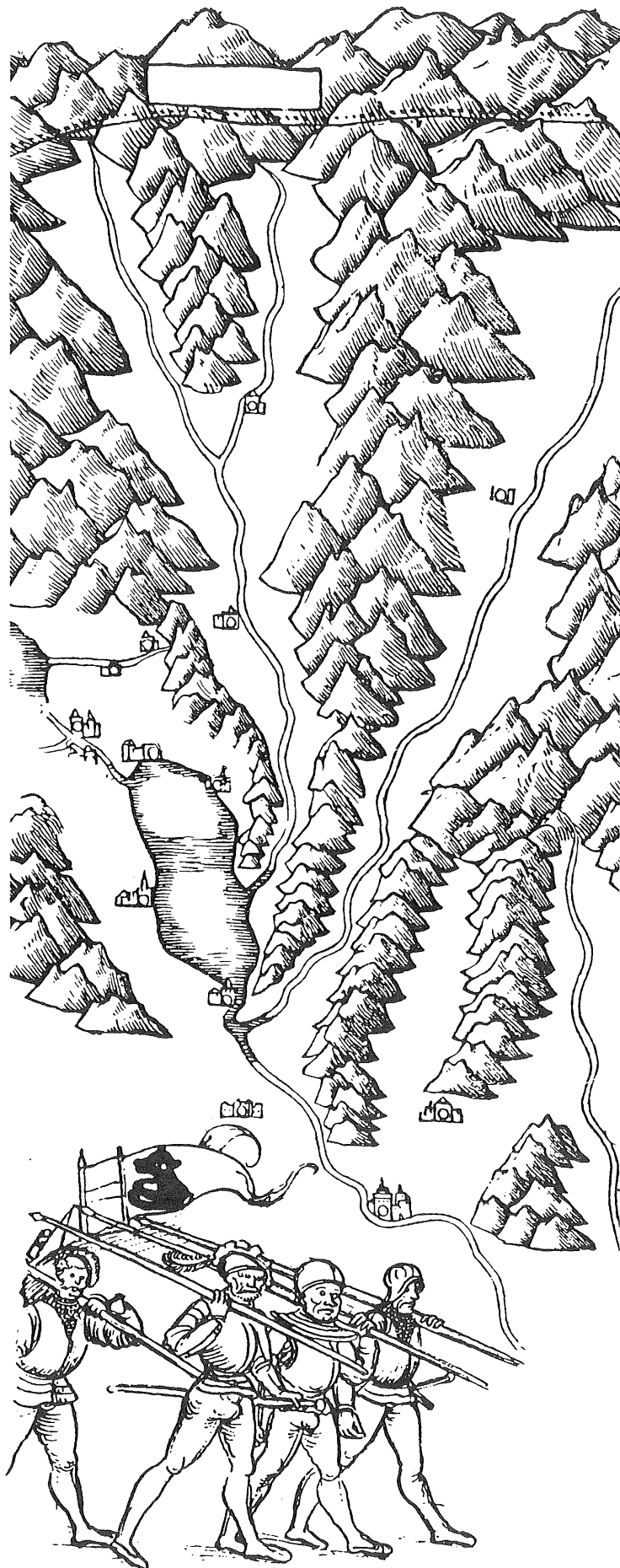
Groups such as The Other Economic Summit (TOES) (\$20/year, PO Box 567 Rangeley, ME 04970) have been active in the fight against the abusive world economy and have pursued research in new, small-scale economics. RAIN hopes to broaden the participation in this discussion by investigating working systems, ones that represent strategies for a better future.



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Lao bamboo baby runner, Savannakhet province.  
Schwyz in 1548, Chronik Stumpf.  
Willamette Hall, University of Oregon.



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Back Cover: From *Hmong Textile Designs*, Chan & Livo



# The Lao Alternative

If international commerce suddenly collapsed, people in Laos would barely notice. The population is scattered about the countryside in small villages that provide their own food. Except for very occasional cheap goods that float into their economy from abroad, they provide for all of their needs. They are dependent on the forests, mountains and lowlands around them. The majority lives in this natural economy, and they live reasonably well.

They farm without chemical fertilizers or pesticides, mainly because they cannot afford them. Their per capita cash income is the lowest in Asia, but this hardly reflects their quality of life. Families own all the land they farm on, enough to feed themselves. Land is evenly distributed through ancient social arrangements, with little interference from the government. A healthy barter exists among neighboring villages that are independent, basically self-reliant, and run by their inhabitants in a fair, participatory manner.

Thailand and France, the colonial rulers of Laos, were never able to force a majority of the Lao to produce exports. This is extraordinary — today, most of the world's peoples live in countries that operate much like colonies. Typically, families are forced to give over farmland to the production of export commodities and luxury crops for wealthier nations. Ecological and cultural destruction, urban migration, malnutrition and starvation are the consequences. Indigenous ethnic groups and their traditional cultures sometimes hang on in the margins of these countries, but in Laos they make up the entire nation. Why is Laos different?

Indochinese countries have long fought for their independence. Major powers covet their strategic location on the ocean trade routes between India and China. Laos, however, is landlocked, making its neighbors Thailand, Vietnam and Kampuchea much more attractive to predators. The mountains surrounding Laos are nearly impass-



*Milling corn.*

able, and the Mekong river, where it flows out of Laos, is filled with rapids. The high expense of shipping from the region left ancient patterns of subsistence farming, along with a rather poor, weak nobility, undisturbed by the world market. Well, nearly undisturbed.

## The Western Legacy

Commercial powers have sought political control of Laos for centuries, and the Lao suffered heavily from attempts that peaked only a few decades ago. The deep involvement of the United States in Indochina began while supporting French colonialism against Vietnam's war for independence. The US expanded the conflict to include military action against the peoples of Laos and Kampuchea, and during the 1960's and 1970's funded the dropping of some 3 million tons of explosives on Laos. Per capita, this is the heaviest bombing of any nation in history. Tens of thousands of civilians died. The countryside is pocked with bomb craters, and hundreds of villagers still die every year from Honeywell Corporation's unexploded impact mines, "bombies", designed specifically for unsuspecting civilians.

This was the ultimate expression of Western Civilization's frustration with Indochinese rebellion. When at last Western imperialism was kicked out, in 1975, Western-derived socialism was established by the new leaders of Laos as a hopeful alternative.

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*In post-war Laos, Mahatma Gandhi's village democracies were about to meet Mao Tse-tung's Great Leap Forward.*

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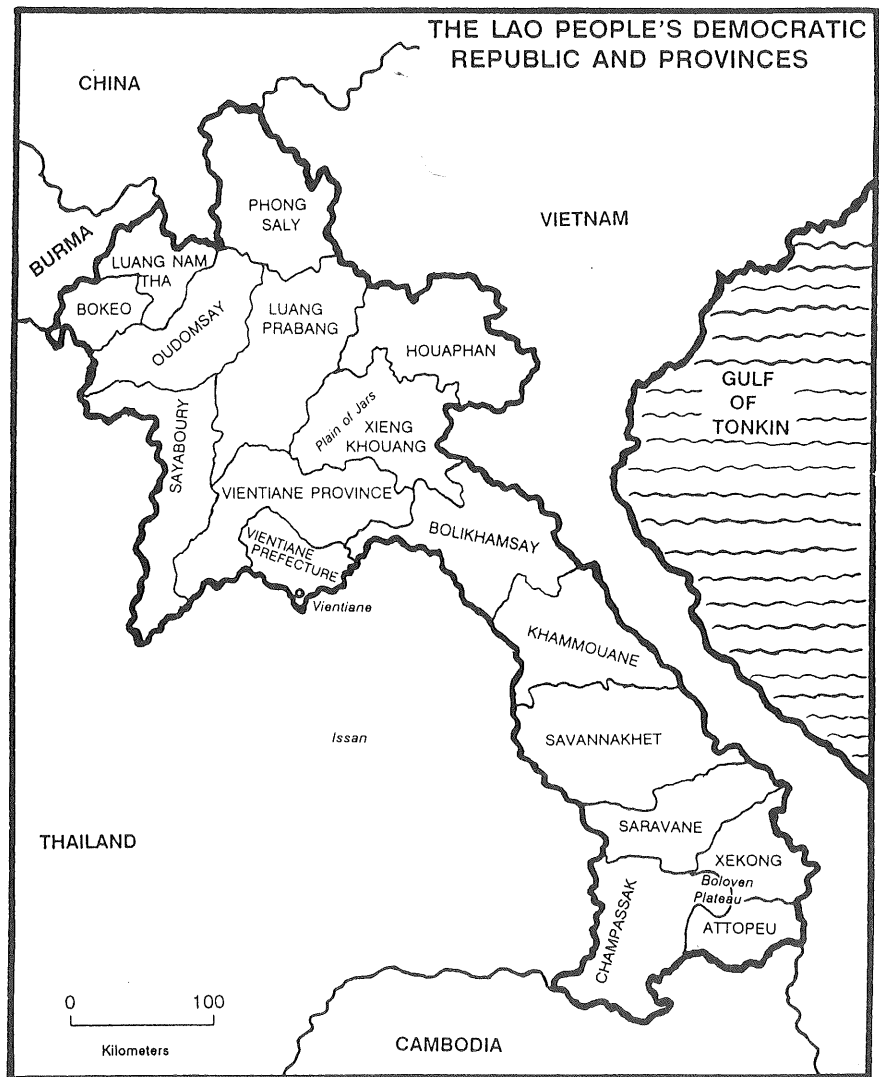
Socialism is often an improvement over colonialism; Laos, however, was never thoroughly colonized. To this day the economy runs by household-level, decentralized subsistence agriculture. In contrast, modern Asian communism is based on a centralized, industrialized version of self-sufficiency: the Chinese answer to the Soviet push for internationalist interdependence. In post-war Laos, Mahatma Gandhi's village democracies were about to meet Mao Tse-tung's Great Leap Forward. The conflict between natural economy and centralized economy could have been a disaster.

However, the revolutionary leaders of Laos found central planning unworkable. They had no money. With few resources and no colonial infrastructure, they could not

possibly centralize a sparse, rural population of some sixty different ethnic groups.

Revolutionary leaders instead spent most of their energy helping to get the people back on their feet. Then they tried to organize people into cooperatives. But again, this is a regressive strategy in a country that already has a long established, cooperative social structure.

The social organization of villages works far better than the ideal cooperative, not surprising since classical Marxist cooperatives derive from crude accounts of village life written by 19th century European anthro-



pologists. At the turn of the century, socialist activists thought cooperative groups should be like the organizations and unions they were familiar with in industrialized Europe. When early Soviet leaders discovered real villages on Soviet territory, they did not recognize their cooperative nature. Villagers were uncooperative to collectivization, leading some to suspect that intervillage barter was incipient commercial capitalism. This was a misjudgment, since the families produced mostly for their own needs and not for trade.

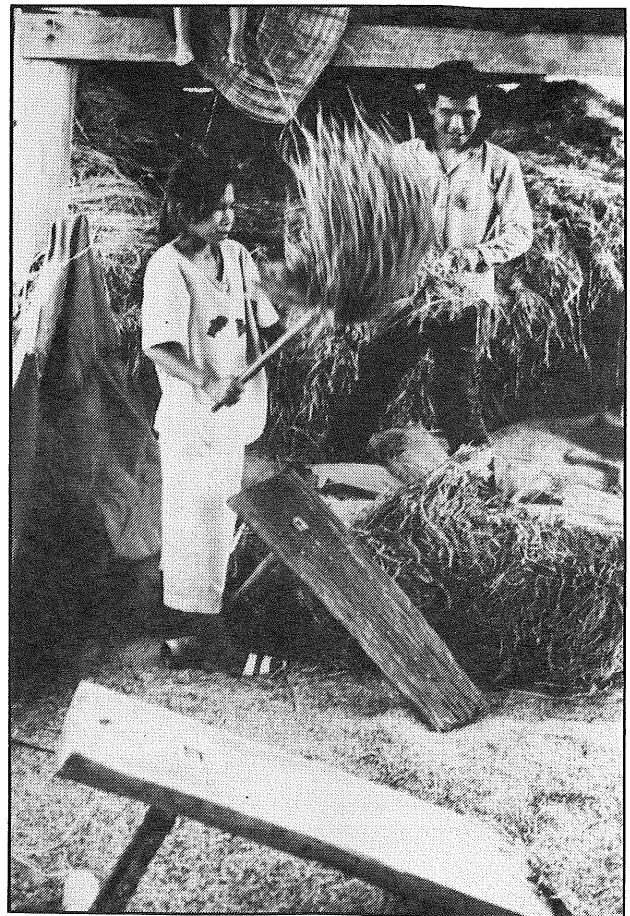


*Above: Harrowing rice paddies in the early summer.  
Right: Threshing rice under the house. Both in Vientiane province.*

Lao villages also rejected cooperatives and stuck to the lifestyle they already knew. If the government had more time and money, and if the Lao were not so cautious culturally, they might have coerced people into collectives. But the government was impoverished, so collectivization was barely more than a suggestion.

Detailed central planning of those few resources available to the government has not worked well. Individual needs and sometimes entire villages were overlooked in plans. It is lucky that they were mostly self-reliant. The government responded that it only needed to learn how to plan better.

Small aid organizations interacting directly with villages had to make room for themselves within these struggling state plans. The plans ranged from reconstruction and provincial self-sufficiency to attempts to copy the rather modest Vietnamese model for industrial and agricultural socialism. These plans never worked as expected, at the very least due to meagre resources, and a frustrated segment of the government eventually turned to world aid organizations. Since 1986, foreign aid experts have been coming into the country with big development money, but the country still does not have anywhere near the financial resources for the planners or materials needed to run a statist economy. Even more recently, the government has entirely moved







*Above: Planting rice seedlings.  
Below: Harvesting rice.*



away from economic controls.

Capitalism and socialism have both failed to gain real control over daily life in Laos. This rejection of any kind of centralized, modern Nation State is a hallmark of the region. Without central control, many basic structures that Westerners expect to see have no place in Laos.

For example, there is no national legal system, and only one prison in the whole country. Typically, judicial systems arise to support trade and large scale ownership, often for noble classes. The further away people live from what they own, the less legitimate are their claims to

ownership, so a rigid system of enforcement becomes a necessity for powerful owners. This never emerged in Laos — the nobility were not very powerful because the resources of their domains were too limited. They could not afford to build a system to support distant claims. In the absence of a formal judiciary, people in a village decide for themselves what ownership means.

The socialist government is the biggest organization in the country, yet many peasants think of it as a kind of intervillage support league. In Laos, independence can be found at many political levels and in situations that are unheard of in most countries. For example, provinces independently negotiate across national borders, and for the most part are required to finance their own services. But real control still lies in the village.

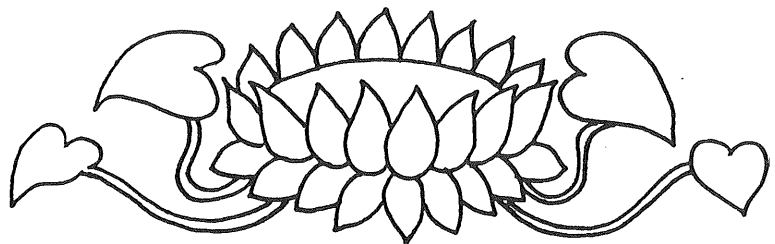
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*In the absence of a formal judiciary, people decide for themselves what ownership means.*

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## The Natural Economy

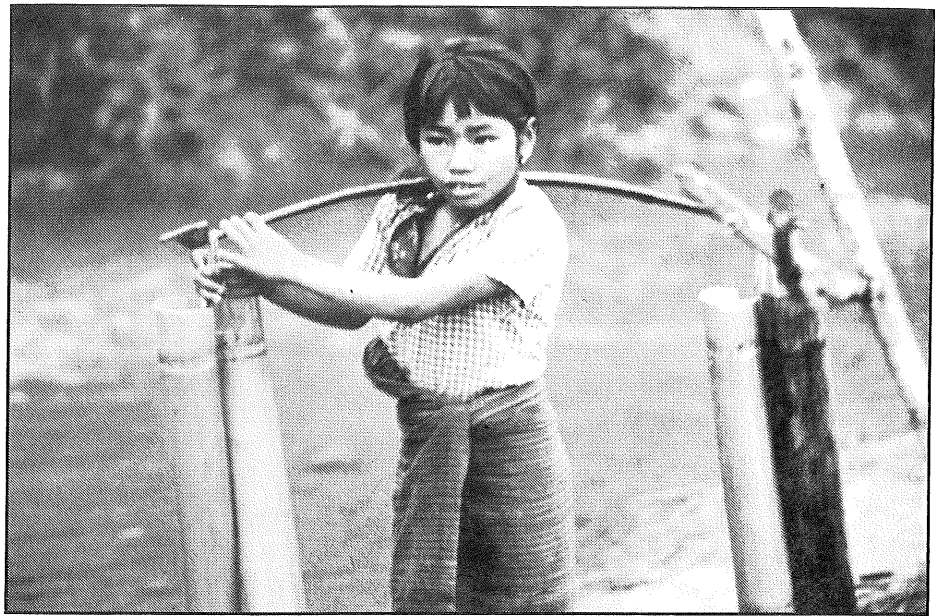
To look at the sparse, scattered independent villages of Laos today is to see what life without high-level political or economic domination might be like. The biggest worries in a natural economy are variations in the weather. These villages experience almost no crime, and actually define for themselves what is criminal. They have a highly developed sense of fairness and community. Inflation is of little concern, since few use cash. Most villages are not subject to direct taxation. There are no powerful elites. Everyone works hard, eats adequately, and gets along well together.

Since they have little experience with domination, they are not very good at following orders. Because they have never been squeezed hard by Lords or Merchants, they tend to work at a steady pace, rather than at the ulcerous speeds demanded in many other Asian cultures.

In a typical village in Laos up to a hundred families live on high ground and farm the surrounding lowlands. No one is in charge — although sometimes there is a village elder who helps make decisions, and who must work just as hard as everyone else. The women work longer hours than the men, but there is no misogynist crime, objectification or patriarchy. Relations among the villagers may seem strikingly egalitarian, but this is not due to explicit ideology. It can be traced to a simple village ethic: the right to survival.

For the Lao, no one's survival should be put at risk by someone else in the community: instability could endanger the survival of the entire village. In a natural economy barely providing sustenance, everyone knows this primary rule, so no one pushes. Older families can sometimes gain influence in a village, but only if the villagers see it as enhancing their chance of survival. Clientage of this sort does not last for long since the environment is not stable. Influence eventually disappears as a family's branches fade, move elsewhere, or experience bad weather.

Despite the excellent relations in a village, many Westerners would not find the life idyllic. The Lao don't read much, even though the socialist government has ensured that most everyone receives a short, basic literacy course. Their localized natural economy never developed reading and writing, often found in larger economies where those skills help to centralize operations. In Thailand, China and Vietnam poor people read a great deal, a benefit that trickled down after hundreds of generations of domination.



*Above: Khmu girl carrying water in bamboo cylinders.  
Below: Lao Lue woman washing mushrooms foraged in the early morning. Luang Prabang province.*



As a substitute for literacy the Lao can, when motivated, learn very quickly just by watching. In a subsistence culture this is one way to pass on skills — something of a lost art in Modern Civilization.

Another reason behind the reluctance of the Lao to read, though, is the lack of anything to read, or the lack of anything anyone finds important. This is unfortunate since many independent cultures have been destroyed without knowing what was coming. Lao villages are rather isolated, making it difficult for them to enlist international support. They are vulnerable to intervention by governments and development projects supported by commercial systems that care little for natural economies. More thorough literacy must come before developing, say, an internationalist league to assure common security among self-sufficient village democracies.

Literacy is not the only skill needing develop-

ment. The Lao are not as careful in agriculture as they could be — their population has remained low, so they scrape by with a primitive type of rice paddy farming. They do not compost, weed or garden. They plant no forests, and the gravity powered irrigation systems they have used forever are unstable.

They need to make changes because the world will not stay away from Laos forever. Events since 1986 make this even more clear. If their culture is to survive they need to strengthen what they do well. They must create a natural economy that can deal with encroachment, with the inevitable demand for consumer goods, with the forces of trade, and with other than local issues. A few aid workers from some small Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) are working with the Lao to achieve just this.

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*Literacy must come before, say, an internationalist league to assure common security among self-sufficient village democracies.*

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*Above: Hmong girl foraging for hazelnuts in the mountains.  
Left: A Lao rice-cookie.*

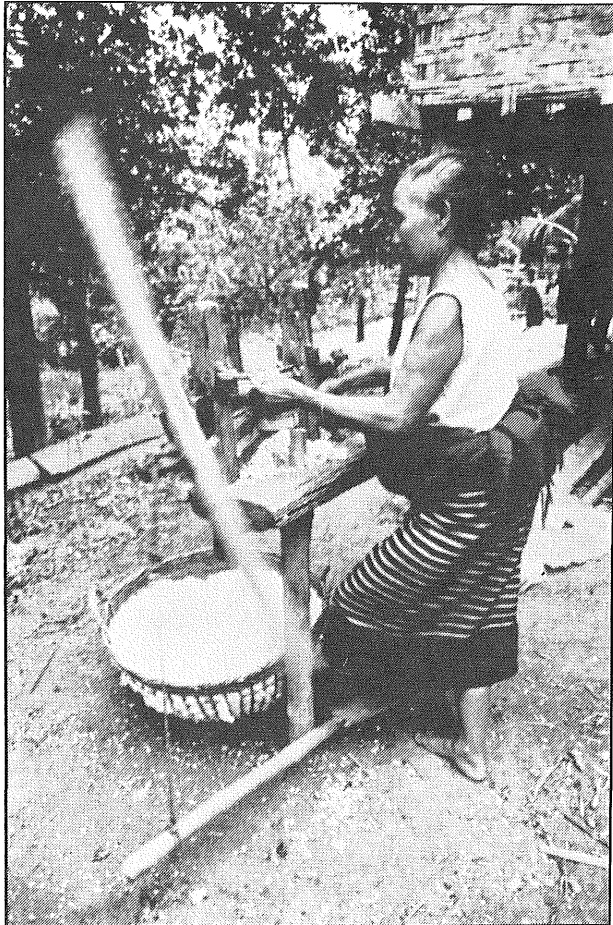
## **Working With Those Who Already Know How to Help Themselves**

Teaching Lao farmers how to farm is like teaching crocodiles how to swim. They might do better, but what they do has worked for a very long time.

What they do now is certainly better than what the banks and governments in the Developed World want them to do. The really big aid organizations are part of a system that destroys places like Laos. Most aid organizations and world lending institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, became active in Laos around 1986. Now these groups build oversized roads, bridges, dams and gasoline powered irrigation systems that peasant farmers have no idea how to maintain, and which provide electricity that no one locally can, or may, use. These big projects waste money, foster corruption, and disrupt lifestyles by encouraging consumerism.

A more reasonable approach, taken by the NGO's,





*Above: Lao Lue woman spinning cotton.  
Below: Spinning by hand.*



is to ask the villagers what improvements they want to see, and to keep projects small, respecting the scale of native technologies and the rate at which native cultures can absorb change. One Australian group is helping to repair existing, traditional gravity fed water systems. These are tiny dams high in the hills that catch rain or springwater, which then runs down flumes and ditches into rice paddies. The Australian project also helps to repair the village social groups that keep these irrigation systems in working order.

Village cooperation plummets during a water shortage. Villagers can't take their frustrations out on the sky, so they take them out on each other instead. Under this kind of social pressure village organizations cannot easily be formed. Compare this with, say, the ease of organizing against governments or corporations during hard times, when victims can direct their frustration towards individuals in those institutions.

The Australian project encourages villages to set up Water Groups when there is plenty of water and everyone is getting along. The village management of irrigation then runs more smoothly through the dry season. The villagers make their own rules, and eventually write them down and post them, promoting both cooperation and literacy.

Some might cringe at introducing explicit rules into this loose, happy social setting, but some rules make village life more fair. The Lao respect each other's right to survive, but when times are tough people will sometimes respond selfishly and try to get more than their share of water, even if they don't need it. Their paddy dikes can be overflowing but they will still take more, and make life difficult for those downstream. If someone's right to survive is immediately threatened, the villagers will normally do something about it. But no one will confront the offender if the damage only shows itself later, at

harvest time, when someone might come close to starvation as a result. With rules and sanctions agreed upon, and simple devices to measure water flow, the problems can be dealt with immediately. Lao villagers usually spread bad gossip about the offender, a very effective sanction in a small community.

Respect for survival makes most other crime disappear. Even in villages where there are mentally disturbed ex-refugees or people maimed by bombs, violent crime is just not found. Subsistence farming requires stability, leaving little room for luxuries like violence.

Elitism also seldom survives. There is little access to

world trade, and not enough good land to support a strong land-owning class. Any family trying to run a tough feudal dynasty would not eat very well, especially in the highlands.

The American Friends Services Committee (AFSC) has an aid program that fights against a specific kind of elitism: male domination. This is a problem with only a few ethnic groups in Laos. The Women's Project encourages women to speak up and help decide the direction of change in their villages.

Take for example certain upland H'mong villages. Unlike the lowland ethnic Lao, the H'mong raise much livestock and engage in commerce at a level that seriously increases their dependence on economic centers. Much of this began when they were required by French colonialists to increase opium production, creating commercial opium



*Above: Lao Lue woman dyeing cotton with indigo. The materials are all grown without pesticides.  
Below: A Lao Lue loom.*





monopolies then managed by the French and later by the United States. The H'mong also suffered severe shocks as a minority used in recent decades as US counterinsurgents and then counterrevolutionaries. All this has helped to create rough tribes that keep their women subservient.

The AFSC Women's Project was only able to make headway into these hardened groups by bluntly pointing out that the tribe would get no aid if the women were not involved. This may seem like manipulative intervention, but it compares very favorably to the type of intervention responsible for these problems in the first place.

The Women's Project was initiated in part because it could rely on the Women's Union — one of the most important socialist contributions to Laos. This national group, with membership all the way down to the village level, was created to coordinate disaster relief. The AFSC found these women very interested in helping to improve their villages in good times as well. In order to understand problems the women raised, the aid workers needed to watch village life very carefully, for at least 24 hours, something big aid organizations seldom do. The AFSC then worked with small projects, initiated by the women, meant to reduce their daily labor.

Immediate labor reductions liberate time for villagers to indulge in health and education improvements. The AFSC Women's Project has provided: contraception, a much sought after labor saving technology; nursery pens or creches, so women do not need to carry children everywhere, and so older children can go to school rather than shepherd their siblings; better rice preparation tools; and catchment jars, which reduce the hours spent fetching water.

NGO's in Laos also make indirect contributions to self reliance, such as their support for small, indigenous research centers. In the Laotian capital of Vientiane there is a group of native technicians that designs, builds and brings to the countryside small-scale technologies specially suited to the requests of villagers. This group asks the smaller NGO's to give them contracts to build equipment, such as sturdy water-powered pumps. The organizations see better results this way than when they import equipment: native technicians can design and build technology suited to the region, and they can better train their fellow Lao.

Encouraging native technical competence helps the Lao feel less shy about arguing with foreign aid workers and developers. They can explain how their native technologies are less destructive than those created in the West to make profits for multinational corporations.

The national government impedes this process. Like many large governments, the Lao administration has a paternalistic attitude towards their people, and they refuse to accept that a Laotian can become expert in anything. This is in part jealousy of the independence such recognition gives people. Many talented Lao have for years been unable to advise aid projects. The government has finally



granted to some Lao credentials as "foreign experts", implying that there are no native experts. NGO's have tried to deal directly with this problem by picking more project assistants who are native. An NGO's meagre funds go farther when they leave behind skilled workers. These are the benefits of a small budget: no one can become dependent on it, and small changes are less likely to be big mistakes. To have any impact at all, in fact, very small aid organizations have to work themselves out of a job, setting up people who can continue the work without them.

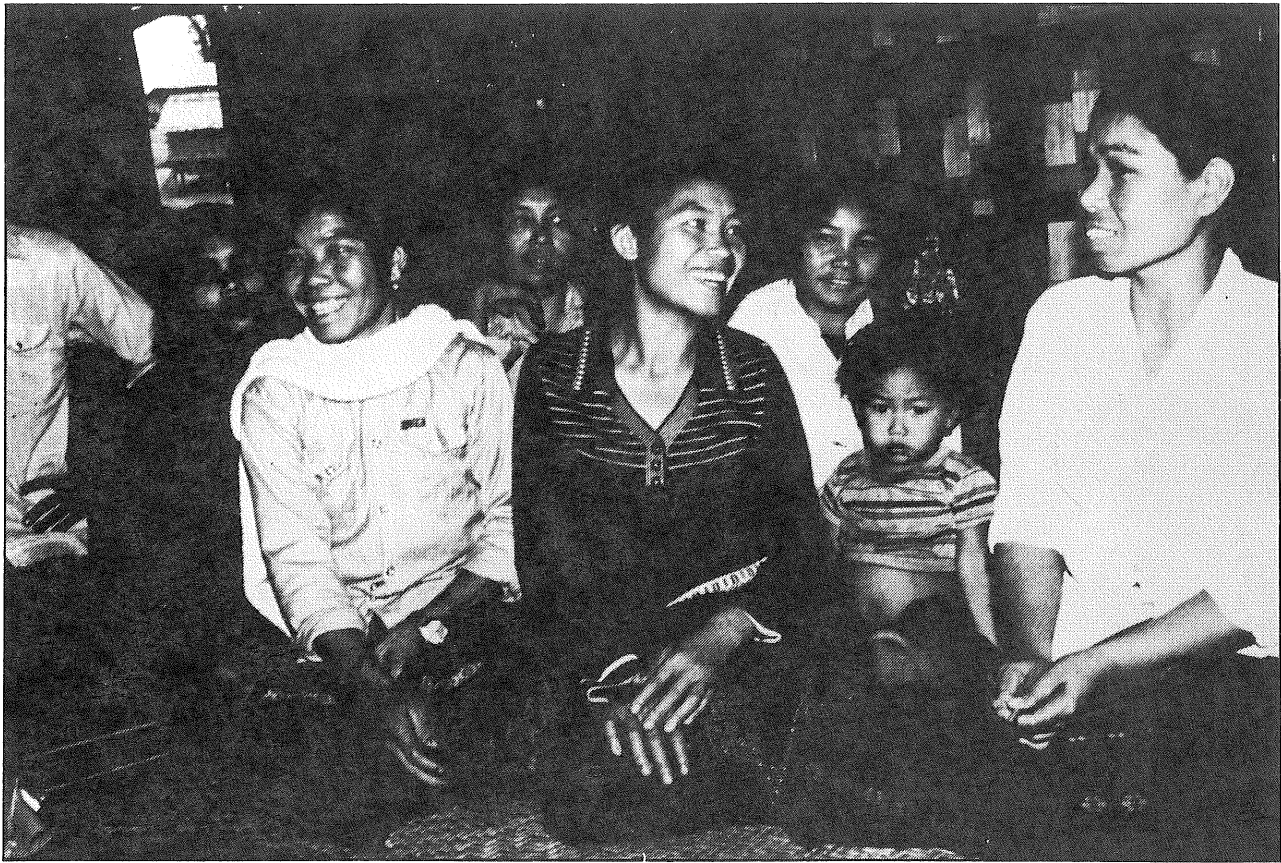
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*Medicines are always in short supply. Luckily the Lao know much about indigenous plants.*

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The Native Medicines Project is another encouraging development. Poor health is one of the country's biggest problems, and medicines are always in short supply. Luckily the Lao know much about the properties of indigenous plants, and this expertise could make villages self-reliant in medicines. The project workers index native cures, after they lure secrets away from tribal doctors. Project chemists and doctors find the active ingredients,





*Above: Women's project meeting.  
Left: Building a house in Xieng Kouang province.*

hold clinical trials to determine which ones are effective, and then pass this information back to all the villages they can. The plants then make their rounds through normal intervillage exchanges among farmers.

In a health project initiated by a French NGO, larger towns construct artificial limbs and crutches out of materials they grow themselves, then trade them to neighboring villages. Former invalids become productive members of their communities again. These are all wonderful and imaginative programs, but what self-reliance projects should the NGO's embark on next?

### **A Plan to Strengthen a Natural Economy**

Ideally, aid workers would encourage the development of local products from local materials. This opens up discussion in villages as to what is efficient and what is not, and keeps products independent from the global market so communities can barter for them. Villages can then pass techniques around through visits and travelling Buddhist festivals, as they do today. Natural dissemination can be seen at work in the speed that introduced vegetables and medicinal plants move from community to community.

The next stage of sustainable aid work must

include longer term labor saving ideas — gardening to reduce foraging time; planting fast-growing trees so one day out of four isn't spent gathering firewood; composting, to increase food yields; planting a diversity of crops to provide better nourishment; planting crops, for sale or trade, that grow well on land too poor for other uses; using the Azolla fern as a nitrogen fertilizer in rice paddies, as the Chinese have for centuries; and supporting education.

Education is difficult to promote anywhere. But the current Lao curriculum of literacy, numeracy, health information and revolutionary politics particularly strikes many villagers as irrelevant. Relevance can be developed: convince farmers to write down what they know for the local children's curriculum; entice people to learn numerical skills so they can better arrange their crops and make barter arrangements with the next village; urge villagers to write contracts for each other regarding issues like water distribution; and encourage them to act as teachers themselves, instead of just giving them poorly trained ones.

Buddhists priests have played a role in education, adding relevance for some Lao. Priests are registered with the state, so the kind of education they are involved with is of the top-down kind. This state-directed education is not effective both because of the irrelevant curriculum and the nation's lack of money for schools. This is why the encouragement of local self-education is so crucial — it may be the only method that works.

Eventually, peasant farmers must learn that they are representatives of an unusually resilient economic



*Since the revolution, Buddhist monks have maintained their own temples. Left: Village school.*

model. They must know how to deal with the encroachment of capital, and be able to recognize foreign intervening strategies. Without such understanding there could be great strife again in Laos within a few decades.

The Women's Union has helped some Lao women to see the great strengths in their natural economy. It sponsored a group of Laotian women on a visit to the Philippines, and later invited a Philippines women's group to

Laos. The Lao women were shocked and overwhelmed to see the problems in the Philippines — few people have land so almost everyone must work on plantations or migrate to cities, where they prostitute themselves or work in factories for substandard wages. The Philippine demand for land redistribution was a new political concept to the Lao. But the Philippine women were equally confused when they came to Laos. They could not believe that everyone was able to feed them-

selves, have their own land and keep a roof over their heads. They wanted to see the homeless and the urban poor. But Laos has no cities to speak of — let alone urban poor. One's Natural Economy can be understood as one strengthens it, by creating the tools for education out of local materials. Black dyes now sometimes used for clothing could be used for black boards and writing ink.

Reeds could be used as pens. Traditional palm leaf and bamboo paper could be grown according to need in each village, eliminating paper import costs. Small, locally designed planing mills could take the heavy labor out of creating flat wooden blackboards. Small chalk stick presses are needed so teachers can have a ready supply from native chalk. Hardwood trees must be planted to be harvested as strong materials for making machines like chalk presses and planing mills.

These are just the technologies needed to promote writing. Developing their like will give villagers more of a feeling that the system of education belongs to them. They must feel it is worth putting energy into, since education cannot be supported by the government — there is no money for it. Many of these technologies can be developed at the provincial level by Lao research and distribution centers like the one in Vientiane.

Unfortunately, there are too few Lao technicians and only so many Lao teachers who can promote this kind of work. And the big aid organizations almost never fund projects requiring such care, although they often admire them. More native teachers would eventually emerge if the program developed relevance to village life.

But the pace of this kind of program, if done properly, might be too slow. Natural technologies often do not develop soon enough to keep people from becoming addicted to advanced world-market technologies. In one case, the women's project tried to introduce bicycle powered rice mills, but the women insisted on small gasoline powered ones they had seen in larger towns. Another project created sturdier roofs from cement laced with vegetable fibers. Now the price of both gasoline and cement have soared and the villagers are feeling the pressure.

There are too few deeply integrated, sustainable aid projects in Laos. Most aid projects hasten cultural dissolution. For example, the World Bank loaned Laos the money to create an expensive dam to produce electricity to sell to Thailand. Money earned from the dam is now used exclusively to pay some of the interest on the loan. In addition to building the dam, the World Bank project also relocated the villages in the way of Progress and helped to reestablish their subsistence agriculture. The relocation was done on a tiny budget — which might be why it worked tolerably well. The World Bank would never consider doing efficient, small scale work with the money it allocated for the dam itself. The Bank's role is to encourage national dependence on global finance.

## Cultural Demolition

Even with the World Bank's help, Laos cannot become another Philippines — the varied geography and the expense of exporting goods will limit the depth of change. But Laos could return to much the way it was before socialism.

The pre-1975 government was corrupt and com-

pletely supported by foreign aid. When this aid was withdrawn in 1975, the new government had no choice but to try to create food self-sufficiency in the section of lowland Laos, around Vientiane, that had become dependent. They encouraged agricultural alternatives to dependence on expensive foreign petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides. In a few years self-reliance returned to these areas.

The new government started a literacy program that was internationally respected, and their development of international awareness was needed for a people trying to understand why the old government had tried to destroy them. A program was begun to make the larger towns self-reliant in textiles, a shuttle-loom in every provincial capital. This effort was derailed when international trade opened up before the completion of the project; now in the bigger towns people often prefer the new, inexpensive imported goods from places like the Philippines.

The government's obsession with centralization keeps it from seeing the advantages of a more robust self-reliance at the village level, such as village self-education. The government theoretically wants to eventually dismantle family self-reliance because it is viewed as inefficient, not adding to foreign trade. The insensitivity of the larger aid projects lends credibility and money to the dismantling of Laos' natural economy.

The West has encouraged Laos to go into debt to modernize. Governments that go into development debt are so financially strapped that they pull back resources from ministries like education and health. These are then heavily funded and influenced by western aid agencies, usually to the benefit of opportunists in the government.

Laos had a very idealistic leadership until very recently. Some of the leaders' ideas were destructive in Laos, such as agricultural cooperatives. But the revolutionary leaders genuinely wanted to help their people, and when the wholesale bombardment of Indochina ended in 1975, the Lao needed help. The new government's models were not so good, but their hearts were in the right place.

Things have changed since 1986 with the coming of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) version of glasnost. Politicians from the old, pre-1975 leadership have gradually come back to Laos, and with western money are quietly buying their way back into power. Every one of the big aid programs or loans seems to end up fostering opportunism, shifting concern away from majority needs, and establishing channels for US influence. These have always been the goals of US policy.

The United States has maintained an embassy in Vientiane under socialism, unusual among Indochinese allies of Vietnam: a remnant of a left-right split in the politics of the royal family that gave the new government some legitimacy among diplomats. But the US never offered reparations or aid to civilians they had bombed. The political dealings with Laos were invariably insensitive. In a nation struggling to keep people alive, with a devastated countryside, with anti-personnel mines killing



villagers, with a hostile government in Thailand, the US embassy wanted the Lao government to spend precious resources locating the bodies of US pilots who had been shot down during the war. This kind of myopic racism characterized much of the US contact with Laos after 1975.

In a bit of cold war propaganda, the US State Department, around 1980, claimed that some form of biological or chemical genocide was being practiced by the Lao PDR against highland minorities. The "Yellow Rain" episode was a typical CIA operation — fake reports, supposed victims on the CIA payroll, press releases announcing hundreds of deaths by yellow mist. Years later, chemists, biologists, anthropologists and aid workers confirm that the phenomenon is harmless bee feces dropped regularly by bee swarms in tropical mountain forests. The bees leave their hives as a swarm when they are overheating, and dump out the heat stored in their waste. Settled upland villagers knew the insects were responsible for the phenomenon, but no one from the mainstream World press ever interviewed them.

Native agents who helped the CIA with the Yellow Rain story were largely the same individuals who helped them during the war in counterinsurgency and in delivering opium from the Golden Triangle, a region at the intersection of Laos, Burma and Thailand. A new Hollywood movie, "Air America", recognizes for the first time in mainstream popular culture the US involvement in the Indochinese opium trade. The opium shipments were directed by the same US covert operations group that later ran the Iran-contra operation, where they and their allies similarly reaped quick profits from the Latin American cocaine trade.

During the war, these US proxies were created without regard to the communities they tore apart. The proxies were then used against the civilian population. Now, the same group, with apparent US blessing, is using opium money to fight the Lao PDR. An odd situation: the US is fighting Laos at the same time it maintains good relations with the country. This does not seem contradictory to the people making policy — it is a common strategy for increasing a country's dependence. The strategy is simple: loan a country money to fight against proxy forces, and the government will be pushed further into western debt. This favors politicians inside the target country who are unconcerned about subsequent Western exploitation.

The most recent US attack on village self-reliance comes in the guise of a congressional appropriation to fight opium traffic



*Above: A US made "bombie". Each year many children are killed when they find and play with these.  
Below: A young H'mong woman just after her husband was killed by an old, hidden bombie. He hit it with a hoe while farming.*



in Laos. The operation is a complete scam at the expense of Lao peasants and US taxpayers. The \$8.7 million over 6 years is supposed to help the people of an extremely remote, self-sufficient region to grow new crops as export substitutes for opium. But this region isn't actually growing opium for export. The money will do great harm, damaging agricultural patterns in the area with some token aid effort, and putting cash in the pockets of opportunists in Vientiane.

Remote villages are often damaged by aid projects, but when the government goes into debt to pay for Western development, the whole country feels the strain.

There are no exports to speak of, so the government cuts down forests or dams rivers to generate electricity to sell to Thailand. As the debt accumulates it is easier to pull the government in the political directions the foreign interests prefer: the new leaders in the Lao PDR now do not even call their economic policy socialist. Already, the more principled provincial representatives are resigning as the government retreats from humane independence towards corrupt dependence.

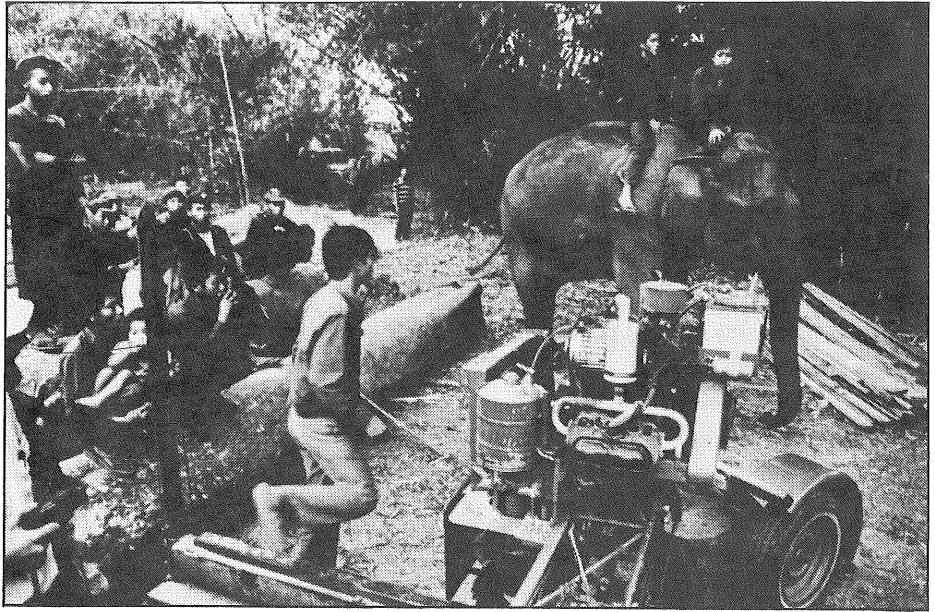
A sure sign of trouble: the Peace Corps will be going to Laos soon. Despite the good intentions of Corps workers, Peace Corps work represents a preliminary gesture to the opening of dependent relations with the US (one Peace Corps program teaches English to natives). Close behind the Peace Corps will be heavy USAID programs like the ones that nearly annihilated Lao independence from the 1950's through 1975. Many Lao peasants are becoming aware of this trend — their government is acting with diminishing concern — and they are very angry. They are still recovering from the last time around.

### What can be done?

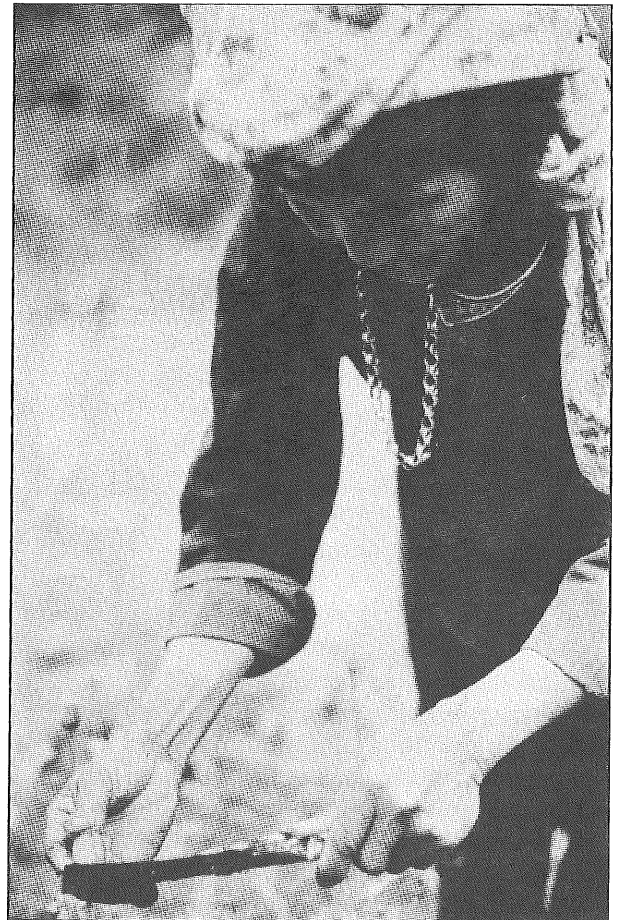
US citizens can write to Congress to stop wasteful aid to Laos. The country cannot absorb it. Additionally, small scale aid workers are now having a harder time starting sustainable projects around government officials that prefer siphoning off money from big aid projects.

Western-style tourism to Laos must be prevented. Shift the Lao towards tourism and their independence will be destroyed as surely as by any other export industry.

Aid workers from NGO's are networking like mad to promote small-scale integrated projects in Laos. These are the only kind that do any good. They need funding. Send money to the NGO's on page 18, earmarked for small, appropriate, deeply integrated projects in Laos.



*Above: Elephant hauls wood to a modern saw. Most elephants were driven away by bombing during the war. Below: H'mong woman harvesting opium. Xieng Khouang province.*



## Indochina Newsletter

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BCAS  
3239 9th Street  
Boulder, CO 80304-2112 USA

## Non-Governmental Organizations in Laos

Although many aid organizations have moved into Laos recently, those below have shown their political independence by working in Laos for many years. They do extremely careful aid work, well-integrated and geared towards self-reliance. They survive by private donations:

American Friends Service Committee  
1501 Cherry St.  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
USA  
(Very broad work in Laos.)

Mennonite Central Committee  
21 South 12th Street  
Akron, Pennsylvania 17501  
USA  
(Very broad work in Laos.)

*Below, and top opposite page:*  
Hmong Textile Design  
Anthony Chan, Norma Livo  
1990, Stemmer House

Ecoles Sans Frontiers  
B.P. 466  
83514 La Seyne Cedex  
France  
(Education for cultural survival.)

Enfants et Developpment  
13, Rue Jules Simon  
75015 Paris  
France  
(Children's health.)

Handicap International  
18 Rue de Gerland  
69007 Lyon  
France  
(Indigenous orthopedics.)

Community Aid Abroad  
156 George St.  
Fitzroy, VIC 3065  
Australia  
(Agricultural self-sufficiency.)

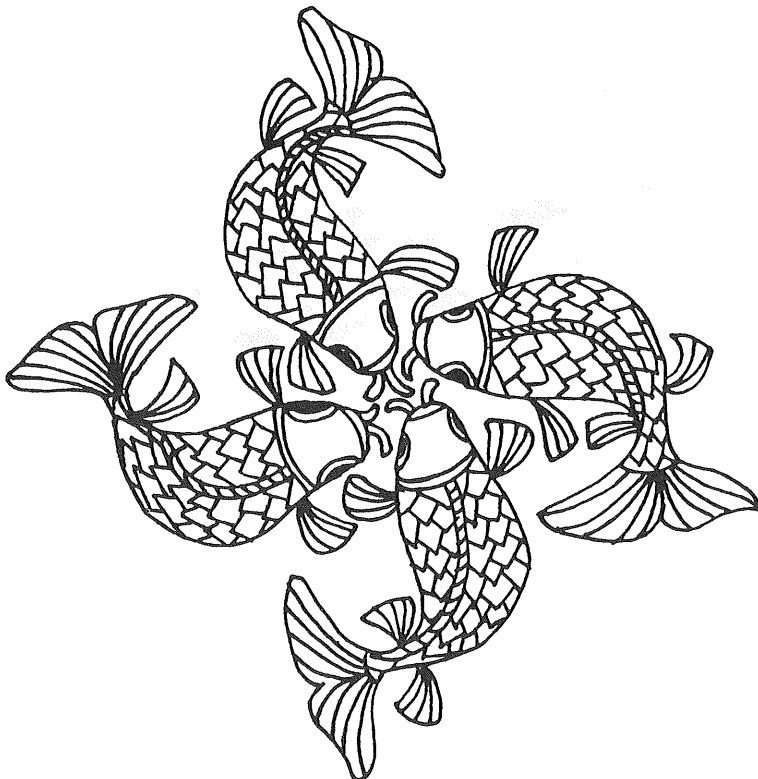
CIDSE Indochina  
Troicaire  
169 Booterstown Avenue  
Blackrock  
Co.Dublin  
Ireland  
(Very broad work in Laos.)

Also recommended:

World Concern  
19303 Fremont Avenue North  
Seattle, WA 98133  
USA

Baha'i world center  
PO Box 155  
Haifa 31000  
ISRAEL

Save the Children, Australia  
56 Johnston Street  
P.O. Box 1281  
Collingwood,  
Victoria 3066  
Australia





# Books

## The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade

Alfred W. McCoy  
May, 1991  
Lawrence Hill/Chicago Review Press  
\$29 in cloth; \$16.95 in paper  
Distributed by:  
Independent Publishers Group  
814 North Franklin St.  
Chicago IL 60610  
(800) 888 4741

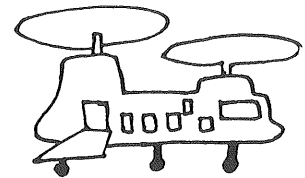
## The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia

Alfred W. McCoy  
1972  
Harper & Row (Out of Print)

The growth of the Golden Triangle, one of the world's major opium growing regions encompassing Eastern Burma and bits of Thailand and Laos, is inextricably tied to US foreign policy after World War II. Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia is the classic study on the history of global commerce in heroin, written during the Vietnam war.

Alfred W. McCoy, Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, has completely revised and updated the book in a new edition by Lawrence Hill press, available May, 1991.

Read the interview with McCoy in the January 1991 issue of *Z Magazine* ( 150 West Canton St., Boston, MA 02118. Monthly, \$25/Year.)



**Yellow Rainmakers:**  
**Are Chemical Weapons Being Used in Southeast Asia?**  
Grant Evans  
1983 Verso  
(Routledge, Chapman & Hall)  
Paperback \$12.95

The only complete study of the US propaganda balloon that burst under scientific scrutiny. A rumor among a fearful refugee population, sparked by an interesting behavior of tropical bees, was amplified by the CIA and world media attention into pressure on the Lao government.

The United States was the last major power to accept the Geneva protocol against chemical weapons use. Yet from this position, they falsely accused a socialist government of using chemical weapons against their own people.

This sociological study is thick with ethnographic detail of the Hmong people in Laos, used and abused by the West and their allies, callously tossed from self-reliance to dependence and back again. The Hmong were set against other tribes, pressed into service as mercenaries, turned into opium addicts, forced to grow opium for export, killed when out of line...this is a most disturbing picture of a culture horribly warped by sudden participation in modern warfare and economics.

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**FARBENFABRIKEN OF ELBERFELD CO. 40 STONE STREET, NEW YORK.**

*Bayer invented, named and marketed Heroin, as well as Aspirin, at the end of the 19th century. By 1924 Heroin is banned in the US. Illegal usage virtually disappeared during World War II. US support for underworld economies in Europe, and dictatorships in Asia, revived Heroin commerce. Advertisement from Medical Mirror, 1900.*

## Air America

Video Release: February 21st  
Tri-star Pictures (a unit of Columbia Pictures)

This cartoon-like adventure comedy makes some very serious charges about US policy in Laos during the war. It is a fine antidote for any big screen enthusiast overdosed on America-can-do-no-wrong war movies.

Although the film's writers are politically well informed, they miss much about Lao society that would have added depth and feeling to this buddy picture. The film's leading characters, pilots hired by the CIA front Air America, are portrayed sympathetically as expendable government workers. To the US administration, however, they were not quite as expendable as the Lao themselves, It is unfortunate that the massive bombing of the country is left out of the film.

# Lao Peasants Under Socialism

## Lao Peasants Under Socialism

Grant Evans

Yale University Press

1990, 304 pp., \$30

Grant Evans makes compelling arguments against collectivization in countries, such as Laos, which rely on the subsistence agriculture of self-reliant villages. Evans questions the orthodox Marxist assumption that such traditional peasant societies have a "natural" inclination toward capitalism. Borrowing from Soviet economist A.Y. Chayanov's views, Evans argues that peasants are involved in subsistence agriculture mainly for their own households, not for exchange. Therefore, the peasant society does not automatically develop the degree of accumulation necessary to spark a capitalist economy. He calls this special type of economy a "natural economy".

To explain how Laos has been able to maintain such a high degree of subsistence agriculture along with their traditional way of life, Evans points to the extraordinary geography and history of Laos. The difficult terrain has always limited trade and communication routes, with many villages becoming impassable in the wet season. The inaccessibility of the outside world during these times encouraged self-reliant communities. That the French were never able to centralize enough power to extract a surplus from its colony in Laos shows the extent of Lao's decentralization and independence. Those most affected by the French colonization were the highland groups, the H'mong, who were forced to pay taxes in the form of opium.

After Lao independence from the French (1953) the elite in the country became dependent on U.S. aid, funnelled into the country by the millions. Evans states that, "U.S. AID's (Agency for International Development) gradual usurpation of governmental responsibilities and division of the country into military regions during the civil war created a peculiar dispersal of state power." (p.35) The foreign dependence unintentionally ensured that the elite would not concentrate on centralizing power.

A mid-1960s increase in migration from Thailand and elsewhere, weakened traditional agricultural cooperation. The migrants provided cheap labor and created a non-landowning group. Additionally, the war created a massive refugee movement which further disturbed the countryside. Yet even with these disturbances, when the socialist Pathet Lao came to power in 1975, they inherited a dependent elite in the capital (Vietiane) and a very decentralized

former administration. There was no entrenched capitalist class common in other revolutionary settings. With the cessation of U.S. foreign aid following the socialist victory, the elite class quickly collapsed or emigrated. The Pathet Lao were faced with the grand task of reviving a country that had undergone more bombings than had all countries combined during World War II.

The Pathet Lao instituted a collectivization program in an attempt to provide a surplus for industrialization. However, unlike the Chinese or Pol Pot's Kampuchea collectivization campaigns, coercion was not involved. Also unlike those neighbors, the Laos government was never able to make the collective a major form of farming. The family farm persevered.

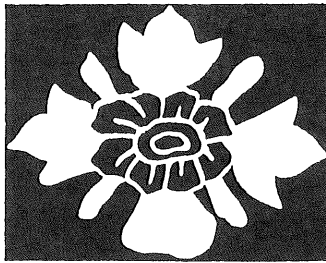
Besides the lack of prior land concentration, Evans cites many reasons for the failure of collectives. There were virtually no economic gains for the peasant family in joining a cooperative. Evans' research shows that there were more dependents in the cooperatives than in the average family farm, therefore forcing the working members to work harder. The government could not provide enough inputs or well-adapted machines to compensate for increased numbers of consumers, the freeloaders and the loss of labor to supervision. Evans points out that supervision becomes necessary to maintain productivity in an institutionalized system of suspicion.

Additionally, the social changes that the cooperative system encouraged did not seem to benefit anyone. Men had little to gain from cooperatives. The somewhat equalizing effects of the cooperative undermined male authority and autonomy. Additionally, they were no longer supposed to claim credit for their family's work. Evans, however, fails to acknowledge any benefit in greater legal equality. This may be due to the fact that legal rights did not readily translate into increased individual prestige for women.

In Vietnam and China, where women had no right to land ownership, they had much to gain from cooperatives. But Lao women owned land and by joining a cooperative they would give up their little bit of control to the domination by male cooperative decision-makers.

"In Laos, women have some power by virtue of their possession of land and the general practice of matrilineal residence. Their ability to dispossess their husbands through divorce tempers male tyrannical tendencies, and the fact that the husband often moves into a situation where his wife's relatives and friends attenuate his social and political commands over her." (p.131)

Also, the point system by which the family's work was figured discriminated against women by allotting more



points to traditionally male activities. Only a few women managed to enter the decision making process. Evans writes about women's place in the society, but he makes a serious mistake by presuming that the farmer is a male. The experienced development workers we talked to said that women do 60% of the farming.

In a society where age is a strong indication of the degree of respect conferred, the point system of the cooperatives decreased the perceived contributions and social status of the elderly. "Attempts to use a system of strict accounting in the cooperatives clearly advertises the relative contributions of each member of the family and therefore can loosen or undermine the bonds of dependency and the sources of authority within the peasant family." (p.131) Ownership in common also weakens the social control by elders by taking away their inheritance control. Evans states that the old farmer still in charge of "his" own land and family is in a much more secure position. Also, early on in the attempted collectivization, child labor did not count toward points. This was an unfair design since children's labor in peasant subsistence farming contributes to the family's survival.

Owing to these problems, cooperative work groups are no more productive than individual peasant households. These problems were also difficult to counteract because the peasants' cultural traditions did not include public criticism, making constructive criticism often unbearable to individual peasants. Furthermore, in traditional peasant societies, a rough reciprocity of work develops into a haziness about who really owes who what, which "bonds social groups and forestalls hostility". (p.141) "Perhaps one of major ironies concerning communist beliefs in the continuity between what they see as traditional peasant communalism and socialist cooperatives is that the organizations they encourage in fact dissolve the bonds of traditional cooperation in favor of a form of individualism." (p.148)

Evans asserts that donations for religious ceremonies provided a leveling of wealth in traditional Lao society. This might be true, but it seems that the contributor also gained much prestige and power. It is interesting that although the Lao peasants resisted production cooperatives, they were enthusiastic about irrigation, consumer and marketing cooperatives.

Instead of wasting energy on collectivizing, there are a number of other ways the government could have helped its people. Small decentralized pilot projects have worked well in other revolutionary settings like Nicaragua where a better storage system (simple corn cribs) were introduced to farmers from various areas by teaching those who agreed to teach their neighbors. In Vietiane there is a Lao group which creates small-scale well adapted technologies that have reached and aided many villages without creating international dependence.

However, Evans seems to have a different vision, he suggests that, "A proper supply of farm inputs and consumer items is a crucial stimulus to peasant produc-

tion". "A more efficient strategy in terms of available resources would import fertilizer and pesticides, both of which assist with productivity increases." (p.172) He does not mention that this led to the downfall of many peasant farmers in other countries who borrowed for expensive foreign inputs and consumer items only to have a poor yield and lose their land. Evans believes in the miracle of the Green Revolution. By importing these chemicals, Laos would increase its international debt, damage its environment and increase its population beyond what the land could eventually sustain.

Some simple changes such as beginning to use animal dung and compost to enrich the soil could produce measured increases in productivity. Also, the widespread use of such developments as the Azolla fern would vastly increase the protein content of rice when grown in the paddies. All this would be positive politically because it maintains the independence of the farmers.

Evans may not have come to these conclusions because his research focused mainly on the villages around Vietiane. A further investigation of more self-reliant communities might have yielded different conclusions. He also seems to have an odd view of "benign" capitalist military regimes in the third world as compared to "totalitarian" communist/socialist regimes. He says, "Moore makes a distinction between autocratic and totalitarian regimes. Autocratic regimes, he suggests, leave the basic social structure intact, and many social activities that are perceived as a political threat to the regime are allowed to go their own way. Various military dictatorships in the Third World may be seen in this way. Totalitarian regimes, on the other hand, attempt (one must say that total success is impossible) to organize all aspects of cultural and social life. The Lao state can be located somewhere between the two because it has never had the capacity to carry through more than a limited totalitarian reorganization of society..." (p.183)

In Latin America, the totalitarian military governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Chile can hardly be said to have left the basic social structure intact. The only group allowed to function was the Catholic Church, itself an earlier colonial import. International and domestic economic exploitation of the majority of the people tore apart families, undermined cultural traditions, and resulted in the death of those who resisted. Under no circumstance did these regimes allow activities perceived as a political threat to go their own way.

Overall, this is a useful and interesting book in furthering the study of Lao and other peasant cultures and natural economies. It adds to the research on the adaptation of peasants to orthodox Marxist collectivization, and lends credence to the assertion that peasant lifestyles do not inherently lead to capitalism.

Note: The map on page 5 and the illustration opposite both come from Evans' book.



# Medieval Movements & The Origin of Switzerland

*The 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation will be celebrated in 1991. Here is the first in a RAIN series examining the past and present of decentralized, community-level politics in this country.*

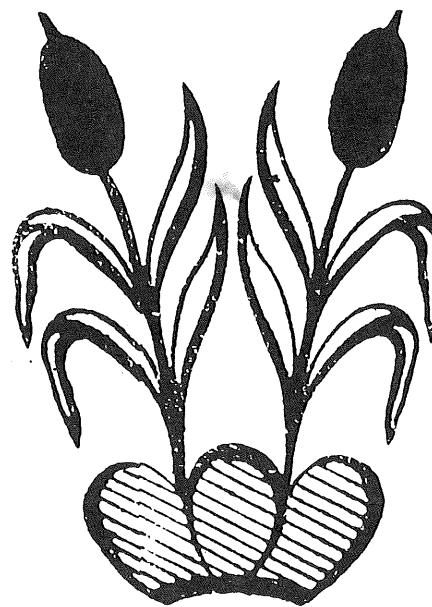
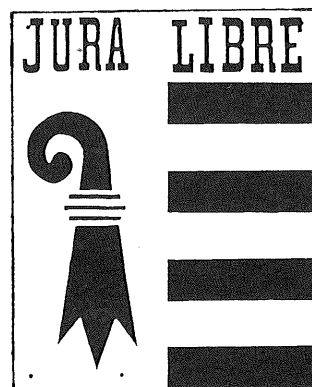
Among industrialized nations today, Switzerland is the most politically decentralized. The national administration is largely subordinate to community government, and popular referenda on National issues are common. Major problems confront the country, but local, direct democracy is better established there than in any other wealthy nation.

Within many countries today there are regions and peoples aching for independence. In other nations, too much political power is concentrated too far away from the populace to be responsive to their needs. Switzerland, where those in the national capital are not considered leaders as much as facilitators, offers an administrative model without the problems of unchecked power usually associated with big government.

The Swiss are citizens first of their communities, then of their cantons, and then of their nation. Local independence, maintained since the founding of the confederation, has left intact great diversity: four official languages, several major religions and many ethnic distinctions. Jingoistic nationalism has rarely had much force.

*Switzerland is a pocket of small-scale politics left over from an age when most important decisions were made locally.*

Unfortunately, Swiss history offers no model for converting a modern nation to a confederation. Switzerland's decentralist traditions come from a time before centralized nations. It is a pocket of small scale politics left over from the days of loose empires of small principalities, when most important decisions were made locally. It stands out today only because its political structure emerged seven centuries ago, and has been modified only slowly since then. The confederation stood out at the time of its origin not because regional independence was something new, but because self-rule by commoners was.



*Town and Cantons in Switzerland have distinctive symbols and traditions. A new canton may even emerge from an old one if some differences are not resolved. Bottom: Trademark from the Aargau. Top: Poster of the successful Jura separatist movement of the 1970's.*

## The Swiss Example

Though medieval Switzerland does not give modern activists an exact agenda, the Swiss example is hardly meaningless. The study of Swiss origins is vital for understanding modern Swiss cooperation and decentralization. For those interested in a future of decentralized communities, the Swiss rebellion highlights large scale change in the medieval world of small scale politics. The Confederation succeeded in seceding from the Holy Roman Empire, and in holding onto independence for centuries.

And Switzerland's success is not solely due to its unique geography. Many mountainous areas in the world do not have confederations in them. Switzerland does not stretch beyond the Alps and the Jura, but this is only because of the wealth and power entrenched in the surrounding fertile lowlands.

Today's Swiss Confederation operates in a way that dimly reflects its very odd birth in 1291. Whatever the usefulness of the Swiss model to modern times, there is little doubting what Switzerland stood for to the people of late medieval Europe. By the time Swiss secession was officially accepted, the Confederation was an example to revolutionaries throughout the continent.

*The peasants tried to learn  
Evil tricks from the Swiss  
And become their own lords...*

These lines are from a German song of 1525, written in the middle of a social upheaval among the peasants of eastern France, Germany, Bohemia and Austria. Fighting the abuses of nobility, early capitalism and church hierarchy these rebel armies, and the communities supporting them, constituted the greatest popular uprising on the European continent before the French Revolution.

The German revolution of 1525 came with the fever for church reform rising in the early 16th century. Many of the underprivileged demanded freedom from Roman doctrine and called for the election of village preachers by the congregations they would serve. But they also sought to rule themselves politically, and as former serfs they knew this was possible only with economic independence. They wanted rights and ownership to be defined by the village, not by the empire and its princes.



*Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, the three founding members of the Swiss Confederation. These were the three Cantons most sympathetic to the peasants' war, which broke out four years after these woodcuts were made by Urs Graf.*

These communal ideals were as far removed as they could be from the interests of the very powerful in 16th century Europe. Yet the peasants felt that their cause was far from hopeless — they were much inspired by the radical and successful example of the Swiss Confederation.

The princes of the House of Hapsburg, who were rulers of Austria and occasionally Holy Roman Emperors, tried vainly for two centuries, from 1315, to defeat Swiss self-rule, and to keep a growing number of villages and districts from chucking their nobility and “turning Swiss”. The Swiss Confederation had no single leader, and was held together loosely by regular negotiation among many small rural, town and church interests. By 1525, joining the Swiss confederation ensured self-rule and withdrawal from the Empire.

The German elites widely believed, with some justice, that the Swiss gave more than just ideological support to the 1525 armed common revolts. This suspicion reflected in part the Swiss historical propensity for setting free the serfs and peasants from principalities along their growing borders. But the suspicion also reflected anxiety about Swiss military skill, sharpened by wars against Austria and Burgundy, and by extensive service as mercenary infantry. The Swiss were counted among the best soldiers in Europe.

Because of their militant support for the commoner, the Swiss psychological impact on medieval political discussion was completely out of proportion to the country’s size. Niccolo Machiavelli regularly cautioned political leaders about what he felt was an alarming Swiss potential for expansion.

In distaste for nobility, the Swiss had no equals. Machiavelli wrote: “To the lords and gentlemen who live in that region they are entirely hostile, and if by chance any come into their hands, they put them to death as the beginning of corruption and the causes of all evil.” This was an age of royal and noble families solidifying power in Europe, especially the Hapsburgs, who long held a bitter dynastic grudge against the Swiss.

The Confederation, whose very existence was in part due to Hapsburg hostility, always won their battles with the family. Even the region with the castle the Hapsburgs were named after turned Swiss. In 1499 one Hapsburg Emperor, Maximilian, organized the entire Holy Roman Empire against the Swiss. The Confederation won that war, and even more cities and regions joined it as a result.

How did a loose, uneasy alliance of small cities and rural districts come to win their freedom and maintain it decisively against the most powerful European dynasty of this millennium? The answer lies in part with a broadening of the ideology of independence.

The bulk of the German peasant revolutionaries of 1525 promoted the common values of small, rural village associations. But many of their political demands can be traced back, in part through Switzerland, to the popular



*A noble family with properties all over Europe, the Hapsburgs took their name from this castle, sitting in a particularly strategic spot overseeing rivers and valleys in what is today northern Switzerland. The Hapsburgs were humiliated by the loss of this property to the rebellious Swiss.*

movement in Italy — in particular to the first success of working and middle class interests in Milan, in 1198, on the Lombard plain of Northern Italy. The Swiss Confederation might have never formed but for the explosion of commerce South of the Alps, an explosion that was also responsible for the rise of the Italian popular city republics.

## The Italian Popolo and The Growth of Popular Dissent

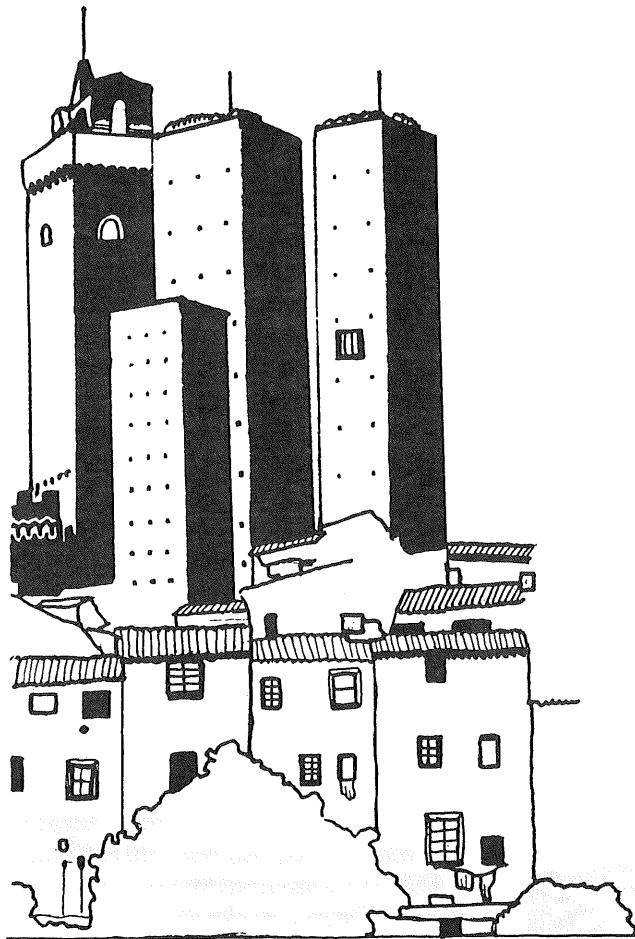
When the ancient Roman Empire collapsed in 456 upon reaching the limits of its own expansion, its intercontinental system of trade collapsed with it. The next 500 years might be called Europe’s Golden Age of Self-Reliance. Export-oriented regions could no longer rely on Roman commerce for basic needs, so after some severe hardship people began producing for themselves.

In the area that is now Switzerland the cities broke up and the people distributed themselves more evenly throughout the region. When Roman domination ended, so did most of the pastoral keeping of cattle for milk, cheese and meat. In areas of scarcity, cattle could not be raised without the Roman trade, since the animals consumed more than they produced and had to be fed in the winter. A greater diversity of crops were raised instead.



Near the year 1000, wide ranging trade routes were re-established as sources of investment capital grew more stable. At this time two cities near the base of the Italian peninsula, Genoa and Venice, were in the vanguard of those who restored commerce, sometimes by force, up and down the Mediterranean. The money, goods and power that gathered at these ports brought quick change to Northern Italy.

In the next 150 years Italian nobles, Knights, Lords and Princes became part of the whirlwind of activity brought on by trade. Their lifestyles changed dramatically. They lost interest in overseeing their lands, which they had maintained and protected by force for centuries. They paid to have them managed, and moved to the centers of activity in the wealthy commercial cities. The arms needed to collect taxes from serfs in the countryside were now more profitably used in collecting taxes from trade in



*Clusters of watchtowers hundreds of feet high were built in Italian cities by competing consortia of noble families. Making parts of cities impregnable, and unlivable, the towers and the vendettas carried out by their owners led to an uprising by the general population. These towers still stand today in San Gimignano. After Waley, The Italian City-Republics.*

cities, or in expanding property and influence in the bustling urban economy.

As the loosely-run towns and villages of Northern Italy became more valuable, struggle over their control became fierce. The larger and smaller Noble landholders fought with each other and with landed churches and merchants. After at least a hundred years of battles and negotiations, a firm, organized city government emerged: the commune, run in an orderly manner by consuls elected by the merchant-noble elite. The institution served to resolve regional conflicts and to protect local property from Kings and emperors.

Though hardly democratic in a modern sense, the commune's innovation in administrative form was significant. Instead of a ruler, the cities were run by elected consuls. These consuls brought major issues before their citizens: a wealthy, select and powerful minority, usually tiny enough to fit into an assembly hall. They approved of issues through acclamation, that is, clapping, pounding and yelling loudly. With this institution, the elite created a model for the broader participation that came later. These city patricians then incited the underprivileged by indulging in greed and feuds.

In spite of the diplomacy on which the commune was founded, the aristocrats brought to town their habitual militarism, and turned the cities into tight clusters of heavily armed neighborhoods — a condensed version of the embattled and divided countryside. Noble families drew close into fortresses and towers right across the street from one another.

Less privileged nobles, smaller merchants, artisans and others involved in trade were no longer willing to provide urban battlefields to families that taxed their businesses relentlessly. They became the Popolo, rebels of the middle-class who were not involved in government, but who felt they should be.

In Milan, recently formed guilds gathered support. As the biggest manufacturing center in Italy, Milan became the site of the first popolo uprising. They built their revolution secretly, in order to avoid the militant nobles, and later burst upon the scene fully organized.

*The less centralized a police force, the more responsible it is to the needs of the residents.*

Because of the turf battles among the nobility, each neighborhood had established a separate militia to act as a police force responsible to the commune. Neighborhood popolo workers were able to convince members of the old communal militia to join with them, probably because there was no strong, centralized, citywide leadership among these police. Ties to various religious, guild and neighborhood organizations among the militia, whose

members may have held several jobs, were stronger than weak orders from a elite communal leadership whose city was divided by noble quarrels. Scattered across the city, their ranks swelled with popolo members, these militia were able to quickly alert and mobilize large sections of the city. The lesson is clear: the less centralized a police force, the more responsive it is to the needs of the residents.

The most radical Milanese, calling themselves the Credenza of Saint Ambrose, broke to the surface in 1198. They worked alongside more moderate groups that supported them in their calls for change. The strength of the rebellion eventually forced the consul to give up half the city government to the popolo. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Northern Italy (except for Genoa and Venice, where the large shipping interests were powerful and the artisans few), they vastly broadened the political citizenship of the commune.

In Bologna, the popolo freed the serfs and took over the government completely. But in cities where the middle class could force no official recognition, they took to the strategy of creating popular counter governments.

Side by side with the stubborn governing body of the old guard they set up a council of elders, a huge people's assembly, and a captain whose main job was to get the crowd riled up. They refused tax payments, battled nobles with their militia, and stood as a distinct popular opposition government, claiming the city as theirs.

Unfortunately, the gains of the popolo were eventually captured by or lost to extremely wealthy interests in these mercantile regions. With their deeper resources and battle hardened knights, the nobility reacted successfully, and fiercely, in support of their way of life. By the 1350's, most Italian city states were ruled by despots.

The popolo movement arose during the clash of interests between urban middle class merchants and urban noble merchants. In the cities the nobles taxed trade and manufacturing, and in the countryside they taxed traveling merchants. The nobles' power to tax was maintained through force of arms, the expense of which was paid for

by taxes. Merchants found this cycle a trying economic burden, and since the nobles would let very few into the power structure, the merchants rebelled. Those who worked for the merchants fought alongside them, broadening the movement.

The Alps lie just north of Milan, specifically the mountains of the Saint Gotthard massif and a passable route over it constructed during the era of the popolo. This route leads directly to the region where the successful story of the Swiss resistance begins.

## The Origins of the Swiss Confederation

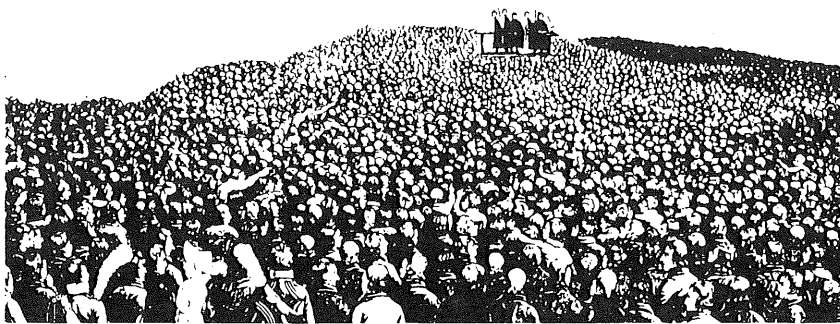
It was always difficult to travel across the massive continental swelling of St. Gotthard, the source for both the Rhine and Rhône rivers. But sometime between 1140 and 1230 the devil's bridge was built across a tributary of Lake Lucerne, part of a road boldly carved along the river gorge leading north. This road turned Saint Gotthard's pass into an important trade route between Italy and Germany. The reasons for the founding of the Confoederatio Helvetica (CH) follow directly.

The small traders who dealt new wealth to the district of Uri, on the Swiss side of the pass, were just the sort of Italians who resented entrenched nobility, disliked tax on trade, and favored broadening participation in politics. These traders took pleasure in doing business with the mountain and forest people of Uri, since there were basically no Lords in the region. Mountainous areas typically could not sustain aristocracy: there simply was not enough surplus to extract. Any Alpine feudal Lord would have been just as poor as his subjects.

When the pass was opened, the Hohenstaufen dynasty that ran the Holy Roman Empire at the time put Uri directly under the rule of the Empire. Because of the pass's importance and the potential for tax revenue, individual noble princes were not allowed to own the district.

Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, the Waldstätten or forest districts around Lake Lucerne, were self-governed in ways common to remote, highland, self-reliant communities in Europe. Typically, these were run by cooperative rural associations, which helped to organize and plan the use of community lands. In the Waldstätten, these rural associations adapted to the influx of trade, and organized their communities to take advantage of new opportunities.

Money could be made through transit (guarding passes, providing lodging and transporting goods) and in trade: the ancient Roman call for meat, wool and Swiss cheese was being heard again from diverse sources.



*Who needs a political party? Start a counter-government instead!*



*Lake Luzern, where it all began. The small city of Luzern, and the districts of Schwyz, Unterwalden and Uri all lie on this lake, their common interest. Beyond the Alps lies Italy, and Milan is at the other end of the mountain route that spills into this lake. From Sebastian Münster's "Cosmographia Universalis", 1544.*

this region became as familiar with trade as most urbanites. This common ground between urban and rural people later allowed the Swiss to resolve conflicts within their alliance, and to fight for their mutual interests.

As transalpine trade was emerging around Lake Lucerne, the Swiss were hearing from passing small merchants about broader participation in government and self-rule in northern Italian city republics. The news of the popolo stirred many Europeans.

Take the changes in legal matters. Europe's center of legal studies, Bologna, had been overrun by the most radical of popolo groups. This drove legal thought towards a

They traded a little of their real self-sufficiency for quick economic gains based on accommodation and animal exploitation, the latter a good return per pound for transport costs since cattle transport themselves. This was the beginning of a decline in Swiss self-reliance in resources that has left modern Switzerland largely dependent on the rest of the world.

In taking advantage of these new opportunities, the farmers and the transit businesses dealt directly with traders travelling through the countryside and the small rural cities. The locals were paid for their trouble, something that would not have happened had strong princes been present. The facilitation of this direct interaction between traders and locals became one of the main functions of the modified rural organizations.

The new roles for the rural communal associations were crucial, because Swiss success later rested on an ability to hold together an alliance between rural and urban interests. In Italy, the cities drove the economy, and in Germany the rural nobility had more overall power than the patricians in the cities. The power-balance usually tipped in favor of either the merchant cities or the country princes. But Switzerland found a third way.

The small towns and countryside together were supplied by the edge of the commercial frenzy of the age, and at the same time cooperated in defending themselves from powerful nobles in Germany. The rural people in

justification for broad popular participation in government, supporting the idea of a civil commune. Bologna began conducting law studies in Italian, rather than Latin, and boosted literacy and education in professions relating to commerce, undermining the clergy's strangle-hold on education. In addition, the Bologna popolo enacted broad measures to undermine serfdom, the stable economic base of the nobles.

While the Swiss were hearing of these developments in Italy, the Holy Roman Empire fell into a kind of disuse during The Great Interregnum, several decades when there was no German King. The Holy Roman



*From a relief on the tomb of a law professor (Cino de Pistoia (1270-1336/7)) who studied in Bologna. The relief suggests the origin of the word 'lecture' (Latin lectura, 'a reading'): Cino reads the text along with his pupils, making comments and answering questions. After Waley, The Italian City-Republics.*



Empire, which emerged along with the revolution in commerce, was built on the strength of local princes. These nobles elected the Emperor — the seat could not be inherited. Emperors acted as mediators of disputes and representatives of noble interests.

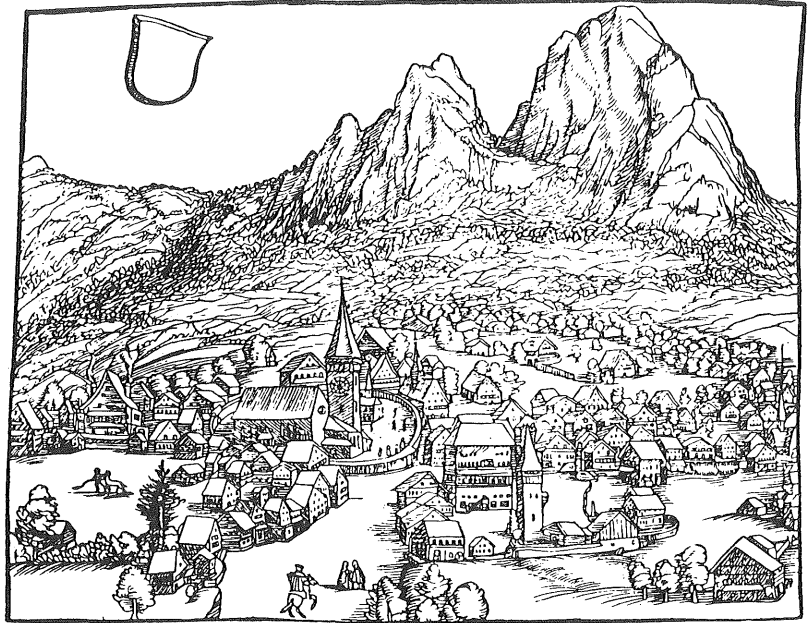
The Empire itself was a rather light structure that served the needs of most noble families. Its purpose was to organize larger policy, stabilize noble claims to territory, and generally ensure that there were always plenty of wars for knights to get involved in (never a real problem). True power was exercised on a local level by princes — very different from the ancient Roman empire, and indeed much less centralized than most nation states today.

During the Great Interregnum in the 13th century, the people of the Waldstätten were not bothered by the Empire that had claimed them. The three districts around the lake were in three different states of official ownership: the Hapsburgs claimed Schwyz, Unterwalden was not clearly administered, and Uri, the district of St. Gotthard's pass, was under the direct administration of the Empire. But since there really was no Empire, this became a time that tested and enhanced the Swiss capacity for rural and village based self-rule.

The interregnum ended in 1273 with the election of Rudolf IV as the first Holy Roman Emperor from the Hapsburg dynasty. Prior to this, Rudolf spent much of his life violently and cleverly accumulating land for his family. The Hapsburgs held their possessions collectively, unlike other families that split their lands among their progeny, resulting often in the disappearance of both the family and its inheritance. Rudolf inherited seven lordships, and by the time of his death he had nearly 50, captured through marriage, purchase and pressure. The Bishop of Basle experienced this pressure — he was under siege by Hapsburg troops when he heard of Rudolf's Ascension to the throne, and then prayed out loud: "Hold onto your seat Lord, or else Rudolf will surely grab it".

Rudolf wanted to restore power to the German throne, though his particular strategy for accomplishing this would have severely changed the nature of the Empire. He planned to use his position to make his family so much richer than other noble families, that the throne would become a Hapsburg inheritance.

After his election Rudolf controlled all three of the Swiss forest cantons: Schwyz and Unterwalden through his family and Uri through direct Imperial rule. The Waldstätten were to him a stable source of needed tax



*Small country towns like Schwyz were both friendly with rural folk and familiar with traders. In the absence of nobility, this urban/rural alliance became the foundation for independence. Woodcut of Schwyz from Chronik Stumpf, 1548.*

revenue, and this tax was apparently paid willingly in return for the continued independence of the region.

In 1291, Rudolf died. The Imperial electoral princes, having had their fill of Hapsburg inheritance building, elected an Emperor from a different noble family. Reacting bitterly to the sudden decline in their fortune, the



*Seals of Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden from the "founding" document of the Swiss Confederation, written in 1291. The treaty, written to reaffirm an old alliance after Rudolf's death, is written in Latin and shows these rural folk to be quite canny.*

Hapsburgs began territorial battles with other families, and began to feud among themselves.

The Swiss Waldstätten braced themselves and signed a pact of mutual defense a few weeks after Rudolf's death. By 1315, Leopold, Duke of Austria and a senior in the Hapsburg dynasty, found some excuse to attack the district of Schwyz, to which his family held claim. Fighting together, the districts around Lake Lucerne soundly defeated Leopold at a narrow mountain pass known as Morgarten. Immediately, all of Europe was interested in what was happening in Switzerland.

This was the time that the Swiss legend of William Tell attempts to describe. The legend is of a Hapsburg governor who makes a Swiss man shoot an apple off of his own son's head. After escaping this ordeal, Tell personifies the violent Swiss reaction to this foreign intervention.

It was this Hapsburg oppression, along with the trickle of trade money coming into the region, that allowed the secretaries of the Waldstätten to organize the fight against the Hapsburgs. In the early critical period it was vital that many of the districts and cities that joined with the Swiss were relatively self-sufficient, in both food and especially water, for which the mountain glaciers were the source for much of Europe. This made them impossible to besiege, and the mountains made them militarily difficult to approach. Their success was resounding, and cities and rural districts all around the Waldstätten eagerly joined the new Confederation.

In the ensuing centuries, Switzerland was looked at as a poor country by Europeans, even though they were gradually relying more heavily on trade from their region. They introduced to this commerce a new product, well advertised by their growing reputation as invincible fighters: the mercenary. The Swiss professional soldiers were from the same armies used to help the always changing, mostly defensive goals of the leaderless Confederation. The export status of the mercenary made it easier to maintain cooperative military readiness among the diverse confederate members. Their military mindset, however, eventually made them rougher and more conservative, traits many Swiss are accused of to this day. Their militarism was vital for independence from the Empire, but it did not make them rich.

With small traders and peasants as allies, the confederation grew steadily against Hapsburg pressure. South German cities joined the confederation for help against the robber barons, the nobility running the countryside. The Swiss armies became multi-ethnic with the

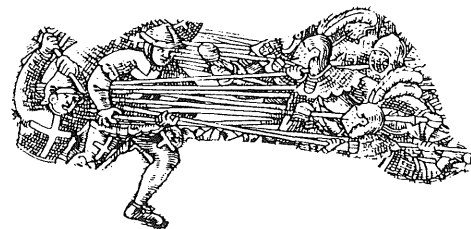


*The Swiss hero, William Tell, is forced to shoot an apple off of his own son's head. The tale is a euphemism for torture, a metaphor for colonialism and an exhortation to resist. Chronik Etterlin, 1507.*

joining of Italian, French and Romansch speaking Alpine districts.

The original Waldstätten and especially the district of Schwyz, hence the name Swiss, fought hard to secure freedom from domination for all people within the member districts of the diverse alliance. The members of the Confederation, though, were independent of any central authority, and the group's goals had to be regularly discussed, fought over and agreed upon. This created a mechanism for decentralized politics still visible in Switzerland today.

The Swiss Confederation was able to secure a stable level of participatory democracy among its commonfolk impossible in the centers of merchant capitalism or the strongholds of aristocracy. It is between commerce and feudalism, both separated and weakened by the mountains themselves, that the Swiss people found a way to avoid the abuses of a centralized, modern nation state.



## Books

### Turning Swiss

Cities and Empire

1450-1550

Thomas A. Brady, Jr.

Cambridge University Press

1985. \$42.50

During the 16th century, France, Britain and Russia firmly established centralized, dynastic monarchies that led to modern nation-states. Germany did not. Nationalistic German historians have moaned for a century about Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian's failure to create a unified Germany before his death in 1519. The forceful Hapsburg prince liquidated many forms of independence in the Empire, but was unsuccessful in creating a German monarchy for his family.

The right-wing scholars are mistaken if they believe that a consolidated Germany around 1504 would have looked anything like Bismark's Imperial Germany of 1871, which was created as an extension of Prussia. There are, however, similarities in the extent, if not the quality of domination. In his move towards monarchy, Maximilian constrained the reformation, put down peasant revolts, provoked battles between city and countryside and caused much stress in Switzerland. His success was directly proportional to misery in the region.

The great internal threats to the Holy Roman



*Maximilian: A formschneider engraving by Albrecht Dürer.*

Empire were the free cities, the independent rural nobility, and the Swiss Confederation. Switzerland was the only one of these three to survive the Empire.

The free cities were merchant cities of the Empire that were not part of noble estates. Since the Empire was an alliance of nobility, the cities and their leaders were skittish about their Imperial membership. Most of the cities in Southern Germany considered joining the Swiss confederation, and many did. But Maximilian at length convinced the remaining free cities that Switzerland was a threat, using both mild incentives and some anti-Swiss propaganda with striking similarities to modern anti-communism.

Maximilian offered the cities membership in a political alliance, the Swabian League, that would give them some minimal say in Imperial affairs. He then turned this league against the Empire's upstart nobility. These few rogue nobles were almost always unfriendly with the cities, attacking and taxing the merchants who ran them. After the league of Swabian cities was seasoned in these battles, Max pushed them to fight against the Swiss. The Swiss won.

The failure of much of Germany to Turn Swiss can be viewed as the failure of rural interests (wealthy princes) to find enough in common with city interests (merchant patricians) to annex themselves to the Swiss



Confederation. Turning Swiss meant a commitment to fight the Empire and enter into an uncertain kind of politics, one that often encouraged the lower classes in their districts to revolt. Cities that did not have strong ties to the Swiss would have needed to sever all their personal connections to the Empire in exchange for unclear advantage. Importantly, they would be physically separated from the Swiss if the regions around them did not join as well. Swissification came much more easily to smaller cities with good social and economic relations with their hinterlands. Many of these could be found in the poorer mountain regions of the Alps and the Jura.

### **The Revolution of 1525**

The German Peasants War From a New Perspective

Peter Blickle

Johns Hopkins University Press

1981. 272 pp., \$11.95 (Paperback)

In 1524, middle Europe's peasants revolted in an upheaval paralleled by a broad Christian reformation, colonial and commercial expansion, the emergence of early modern nations, and the aggressive expansion and oppressive solidification of feudalism.

Blickle, in the best book of its kind available in English, analyzes not just the causes and course of the rebellions. He examines in detail the peasant demands,

*Below and bottom opposite page, The Book of Trades (Ständebuch) Jost Amman and Hans Sachs, 1568.*



their revolutionary governments, and their utopian ideals.

For those who today look forward to the break-up of the modern nation-state, there are great lessons here. These peasants knew better than we the meaning of local independence.

### **The Italian City-Republics**

Daniel Waley

World University Library (McGraw-Hill)

1969. 254 pp. (Out of Print)

A city that is also a nation does not look much like a modern city, especially in the degree to which the city occupies its people's attention. Imagine a city where the citizens pay only local taxes, where nationalism and a feeling of community are nearly the same thing. For many centuries Italian political units were quite small, but from the 11th to the 14th centuries they were republics, where citizens voted on the state of the commune.

Waley's book, which needs to be reprinted, is an engrossing, accessible account of this time before tyranny retook the Italian city-states. If cities were to become independent of nations today, they might very well face many of the same problems that commerce created in Italy so many years ago.

### **Innerschweiz und Frühe Eidgenossenschaft**

February, 1991

Walter-Verlag, Olten, Switzerland

From the series: Historischer Verein der fünf Orte

In this collection is Peter Blickle's new essay on the influences of the years 1200-1400 on the Swiss constitution: "Friede und Verfassung".

### **Power and Imagination**

City-States in Renaissance Italy

Lauro Martines

Johns Hopkins University Press

1988. 400 pp., \$13.95 (paperback)

From the start of the commercial boom in the 11th century, to the ends of the cultural renaissance in the 17th, Martines examines the many expressions of power in the great Italian city-states. He unflinchingly describes the transformation of popular city republics into corrupt, dissolute, powerful oligarchies.

The fruits of the renaissance, so long studied out of context, emerged with an approving and dominating elite, to whose taste, morality and politics the art was targeted. The economic and social conditions of the times produced propaganda for the masses and symbols, ideals and rose-tinted glasses for the patricians. It is telling, perhaps, that this ostentation is our most popular inheritance from the long history of the Italian city-state.

# The Oregon Experiment After Twenty Years

*People can plan and build their community in a participatory, democratic manner, even if that community is responsible to a much larger system. Twenty years ago, at the largest institution in Eugene, Oregon, a University administration gave up some of its power to test this idea.*

In 1970, students at the University of Oregon showed keen interest in the Academic Program: they tried to force the Reserve Officers' Training Corps off campus. They changed the landscape, blockading and permanently closing a major street running through the campus. They occupied the administration building and called for a General Strike in order to move current events to the top of the curriculum.

The University at first tried to use force to quiet the students. But after the invasion of Cambodia led to the killing of student protesters at Kent State, a shocked administration reversed its policy. The University President shut down regular classes in order to hold campus-wide discussions on the US war against Indochina.

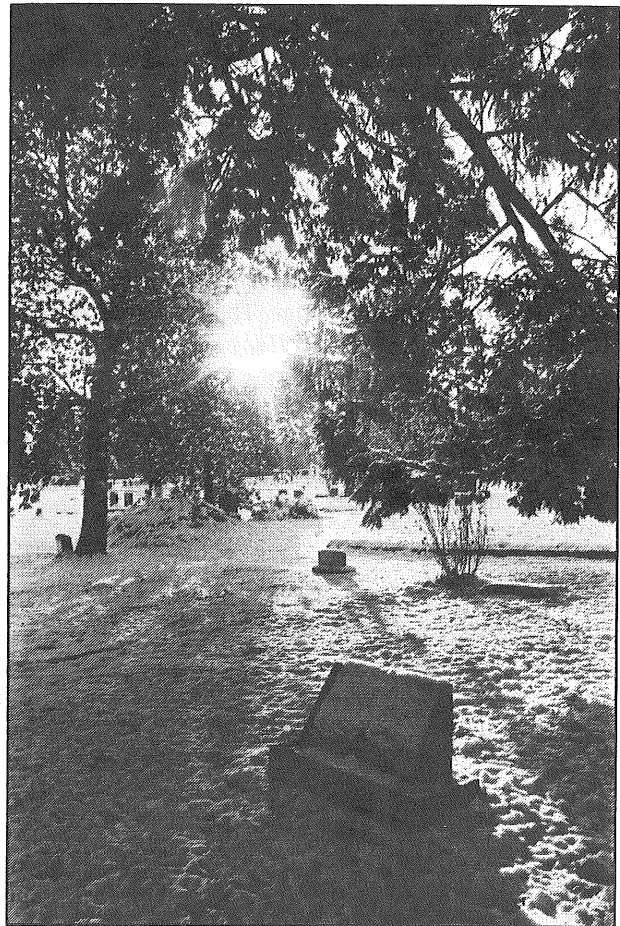
The administrators were changing the way they ran their institution. One clear need was for a change in campus planning, which steered construction. By the end of 1970, they were using the consulting services of the Berkeley Center for Environmental Structure and its chief architect Christopher Alexander, one of an emerging generation of radical and innovative planners.

The University administration worked with Alexander and his colleagues to plan an ideal Institution, where broad democratic participation and interaction would be the key to campus harmony, and campus construction. New buildings would be small, innovative, and carefully designed by their future users. There would be no dominating campus Master Plan. Instead, everyone would help to construct patterns, or collective policies, that would guide changes and check destructive growth. The campus would grow into a wholesome community, and over the years would take on the physical likeness and well-worn appeal of older European Universities. The institution would be healed, turned into a robust and healthy organism.

After testing these ideas in pilot projects, Oregon officials adopted them formally in 1974. Alexander then published "The Oregon Experiment" (1975, Oxford University Press) [see RAIN August/September 1980], which became one of the best selling planning books of all time. Since then, what has happened to The Experiment?

## Plans and Profits

One of Alexander's first targets was the Master Plan. An actual map of the future is frustrating to everyone, even to old-fashioned administrators who try to use them to maintain control. Forceful drawings of a future campus are far removed from the detailed needs of its



*The Master Plan was buried here. The verdant Odd Fellows' cemetery adjacent to campus was for decades on the Campus Master Plan as a site for construction. A broad protest removed the cemetery from the plan, rendering the map meaningless.*

future residents. General plans are too abstract to interpret consistently, yet project a forceful image of destiny. Alexander wrote that a Master Plan makes people see how "they are merely cogs in someone else's machine", someone perhaps long gone from the scene, so "how can they feel any sense of identification with the community, or any sense of purpose there?" The use of Master Plans maintains a rift between a campus and its users.

So the University dropped them. Now, departments and other groups submit their priorities for construction, which are then weighed by a campus planning committee with diverse membership. Then, when a project finally gets money, it also gets a special team of faculty,

students and staff, such as janitors and maintenance workers. The team is not just advisory: it designs the buildings, collaborating with respectful professional architects.

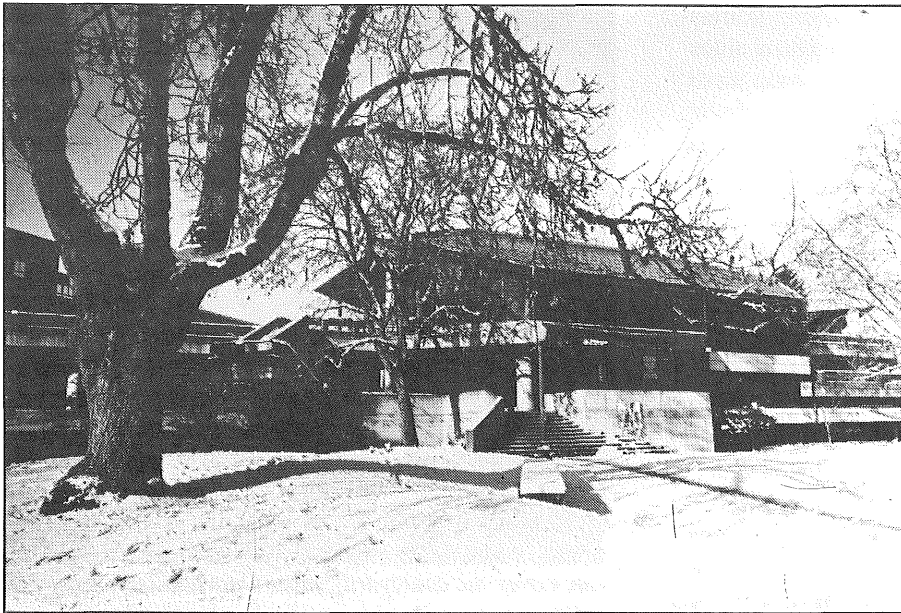
The result is a genuine improvement in building design, partially because the designers will be the future users of the facility. They are motivated to get it right, and to finish quickly.

The buildings are also better because Alexander helped Oregon escape from the Era of the Disposable Building. For many decades, architects and University officials designed and built with little consideration for the future. A lack of accountability to users, along with a post-World War II gush of money, spawned oppressive megastructures. They seemed to be monuments to the Institution, considered perfect and finished — despite certainty of error and changing user needs.

The bigger and flashier a building project, the easier it was to find funding for it. There were few incentives to design or budget with consideration for future maintenance or modification, so ultimately the buildings will decay and be torn down. New construction makes administrators seem visionary and brings fresh profit to designers and contractors. The economic pressures to mass produce interchangeable buildings warps designs into worthlessness.

The Oregon Experiment tries to correct these problems by making each project search for the needs of the users. A house designed for individuals is more valuable than a house designed for mass production. A collaboration of users, even if imperfect, produces a better building for them. Alexander helped revive the much reviled process of design by committee, with an essential difference: the committee must themselves use what they design.

The old throw-away economy caused many campus plans to fracture: land was grabbed by competing departments without the approval of



*Above: A heated debate in 1970, over this major addition to the Student Union, made the need for student participation in design more obvious to administrators. Below: A \$45 million building project. Despite the size of the pork barrel, these science buildings were well designed by its current inhabitants.*





the campus community. Departments collected power, and isolated themselves in huge building complexes.

The Oregon Experiment has given interdisciplinary faculty a bigger voice in design, reflected well in the clustered departments woven together in the new science buildings. The campus planning committee now puts in their place departments that are too pushy, as in a recent case where the athletic department tried to change plans for an outdoor center on territory it considered its own.

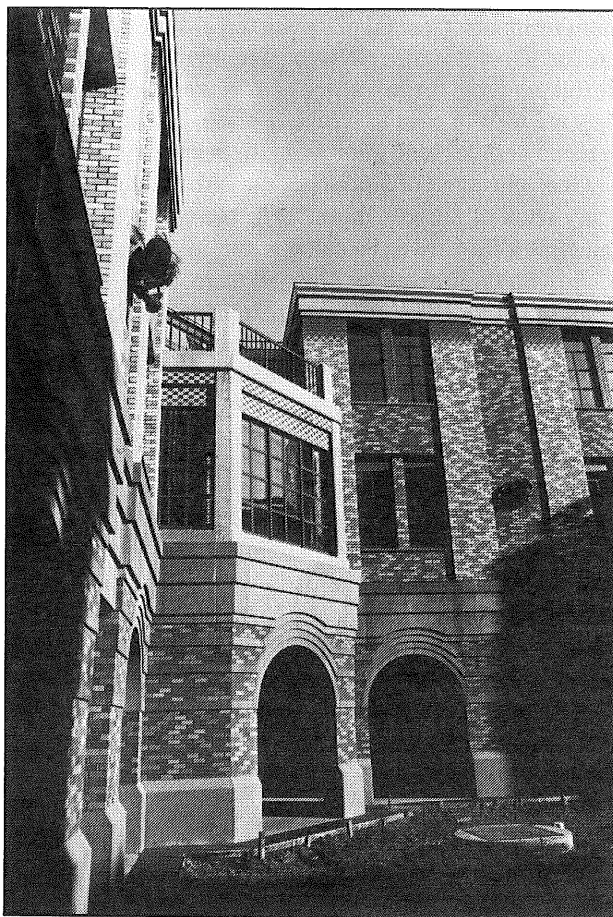
So, in addition to putting down domination and encouraging cooperation, The Experiment can claim that the planning office now builds for people, permanence, conservative spending, continuous modification and repair. This system works best when projects are kept small.

## Small, useful growth

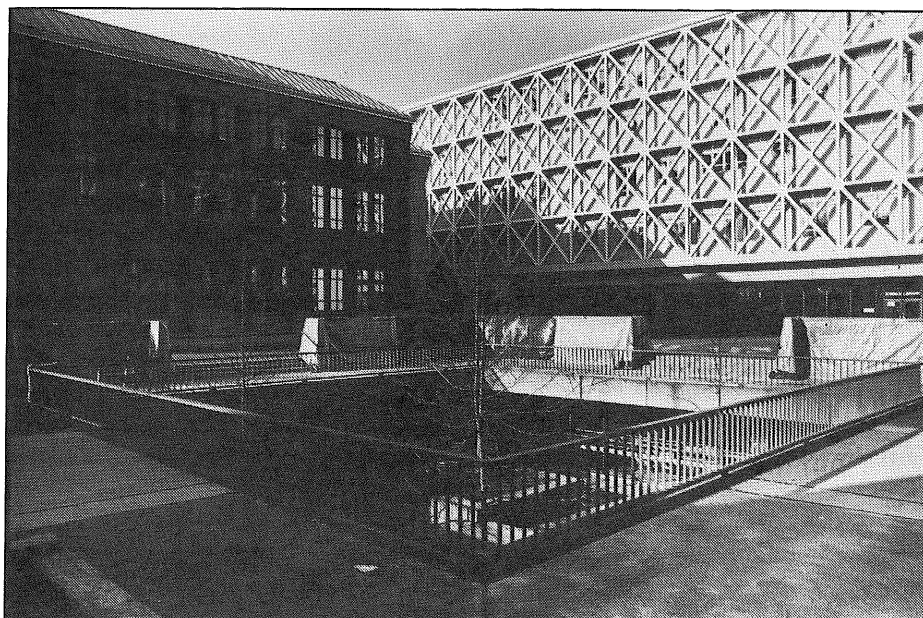
When building projects are smaller, mistakes are smaller. Perhaps it is inappropriate to call them mistakes...they are just small modifications that need additional adjustments later, part of dynamic growth and repair. Small projects are easier to design properly — our intuition works better on them because they are closer to our experience as small creatures. Alexander wanted to stimulate thousands of small, local campus projects through The Oregon Experiment.

Making projects small at a state-run institution is very hard. The State Board of Higher Education is many miles away in the State Capital. It has to approve all construction projects. The board members need to review new projects carefully — so they tend to spend their time on the most prominent projects. All State Universities then compete to construct larger, more important sounding projects, typically wasteful ones. But since the University of Oregon is experimenting with small projects, it cannot compete with big projects in this game. This motivates University officials to push Alexander's new ideas into the consciousness of the State Board, since otherwise they would get no money.

This is another success of The Experiment: influence. The State Board is slowly getting used to the idea of conservation — allocating some funds to keep up and modify existing buildings rather than opting only for the construction of new multiple-story monsters. The board has even instructed the City and County governments to respect and adapt to the scale and participatory nature of The Experiment.



*Streisinger Hall, named after a local developmental geneticist (a fruit fly bust and a school of zebra fish watch over the courtyard), has, unfortunately, no public entrance. Its place was taken late in the design by high-security research animal housing. A campus vote on animal research might have resolved the problem. Below: The crosshatched building and the pit both date from before the Oregon Experiment.*



The ideology is making slow, but definite, progress through many channels. In the past these suggestions might have sounded like a call for anarchy to many planners, architects, civic politicians and their staffs, but now some are beginning to see that the University's small-scale, democratic design is much more responsible than the abusive politics and economics they participate in every day.

## The role of planners

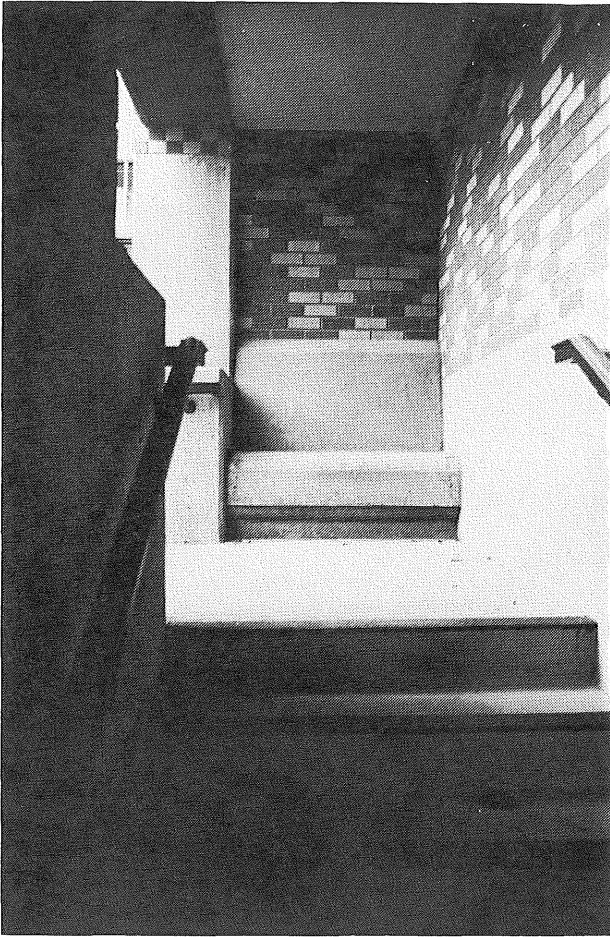
The campus planners that have emerged from The Experiment have great patience, negotiating skill and earnest interest in their users. They have little power over some issues, but they share what power they do have with those concerned. In contrast, from 1915 through the second World War the University grounds were ruled by an autocrat, Ellis Lawrence, a skilled architect who designed and built from plans seen only by a few. The impressive distance between Ellis and modern campus planners is partly Alexander's doing, partly a change in administrative attitudes since the 1960's, and partly a change in design theory.

Many designers before Alexander's time combined good intentions with narrow notions about the impact of their work on people's lives. They tried to change society from the drafting board. Many believed, for example, that poorly designed tenement projects caused urban poverty; skyscrapers were at fault for urban stress; poor mall design meant a poor town economy; a good road created a good neighborhood; students studied if they had just the right kind of desk.

There is no doubt that different structures constrain in different ways. Certainly, good buildings are a part of some very stimulating environments, but only if certain demographic, geographic, political, economic, and cultural conditions are met. Engineering cannot change everything. The assertion that design can solve social problems was wishful ignorance of complex activities: Urban poverty is maintained through economics and politics that favor the wealthy; urban stress is associated with hectic economic activity, lack of job satisfaction, and dangers related to the differences in wealth between people in the city; weak town economies are made when money and resources leave town; neighborhoods are drawn together by social needs, not by roads; student success depends on motivation, which is sparked more by the curriculum than by the furniture. But proposing such a broad analysis would have been threatening to those who funded limited design research.

Alexander and the new environmentalists of the late 1960's still believed in social engineering, but they rejected the old school's rough determinism. They found in evolutionary biology the useful notion that Form and Function do not absolutely follow one another.

User needs cannot be turned into a single building



*Design by committee works if the committee will be among the users. But some problems can be fixed only through continuous repair. Above: A dangerous, isolated spot outside the new science buildings. Below: Handrails or monorails?*





design, and buildings cannot completely modify people's behaviors. For example, people cannot communicate their needs completely to an architect, so the form that follows does not function well. On the other hand, a building cannot entirely mold behavior, so its function only partly follows from its form.

Instead, good design comes from a dialogue between construction and use. If something is not quite right, fix the building a little bit, and allow people's behavior to adjust a little bit. Social engineering entirely through architecture is not possible; at best designers can only help builders and users to regularly communicate so that needs and structure closely reflect each another. There is no such thing as a perfect fix, but the smaller the change, the more likely it can be guided in the right way. In fits and bits, as in nature, form and function come together.

Architecture today is mostly big fits. Profit drives design, so planners and architects like Alexander are only able to encourage small changes if such encouragement does not threaten business. Because of this, Alexander has rarely been very successful in creating his living architecture.

Fortunately, Universities are less pressured in some areas, so slow, human-scale campus planning has been more successful. And sometimes organic architectural ideas sound pleasant even to hardened politicians, deans and business magnates. After all, Corridors of Power are only hallways. Why not create nice spaces for those who can afford them?

By approaching social engineering from an ecological perspective, Alexander has pushed planners to confront Big Business and Big Government. In support, he offers planners tools he calls "patterns".

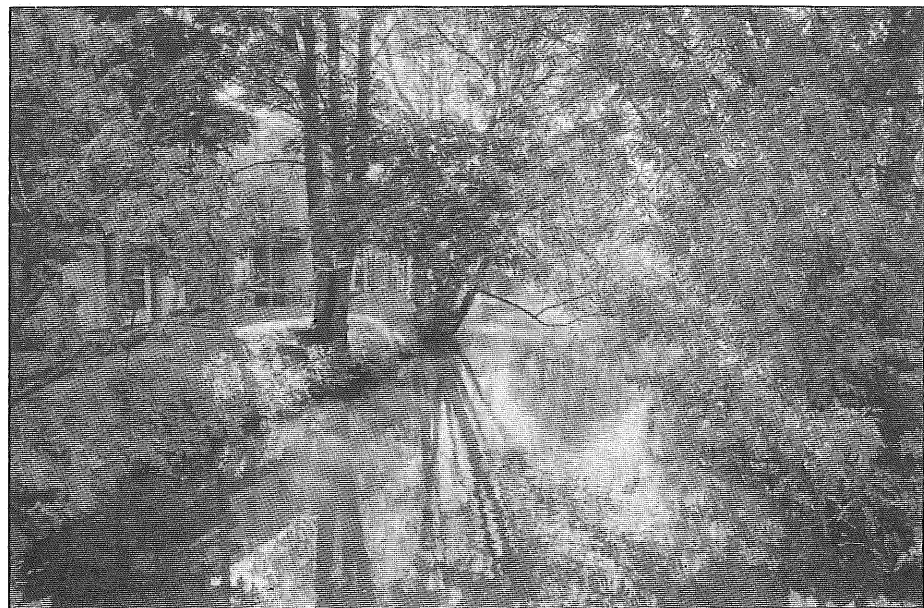
## Patterns: Responsible Anarchy

Alexander wrote another book, "A Pattern Language", part of the series that includes "The Oregon Experiment". In it are hundreds of suggestions for designing everything from Doors to Nations. Its strongly worded pronouncements on solutions to problems make it read as though intended to be a planner's Bible. But the book represents only a model, a suggestion to communities on how to organize what they know of their own traditions.

Alexander knew very well that there can be no single manual to all communities. Each Community must create



*Above: The city modifies a street running through campus without notifying the public, foreshadowing research park construction near campus. The park has been placed outside planning office jurisdiction.  
Below: The park will destroy many natural scenes.*





one for themselves. They must research problems and solutions themselves, write them down, and continue to modify them slowly and openly. A language of these policies or patterns is something like a local constitution, printed in a form easily available to people in the community.

In practice, patterns have been useful not so much for resolving problems as for breaching difficult social obstacles. They allow personal questions to arise without hesitation: "do you need a private office or a place to hold a private conversation?" Or "faculty members move around campus all day to teach, research, collaborate or

experiment; so why do they get offices with windows when secretaries have to be in their offices all day in interior spaces without contact with the outside world?" A pattern will also suggest a resolution to the problem: in the latter case, it might recommend creating buildings with more rooms that have windows.

But the University has mostly put aside the idea of pattern research. This is a major practical difficulty with Alexander's approach. Such introspection takes valuable time needed for more immediate planning problems.

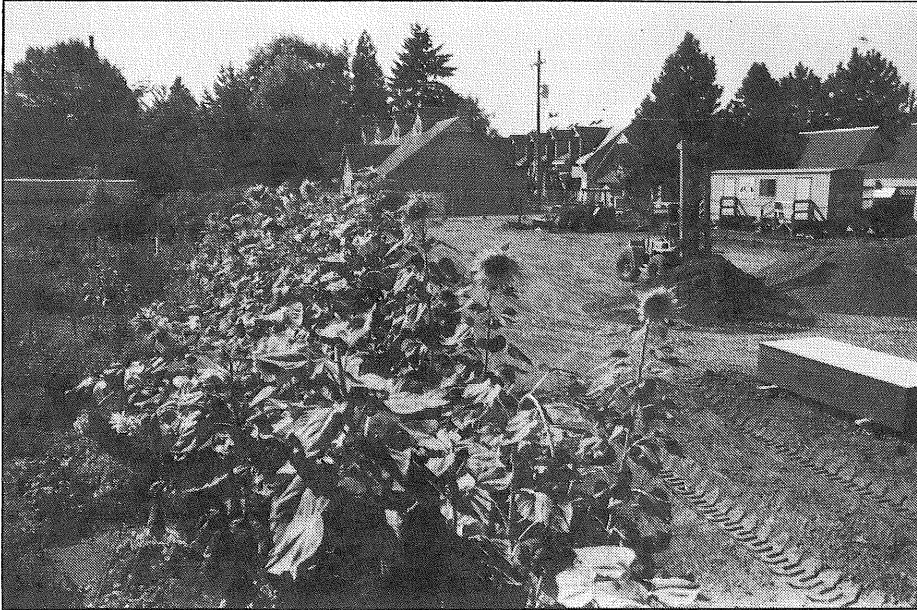
And patterns are, by their nature, either dogmatic, incomplete or partly redundant, so drafting them is an unsatisfying task. The solutions seem to beg questions.

A good example is the very first pattern in "A Pattern Language": Independent Regions. These are the human scale ideals of grassroots democracy. Keep political control local with local budgets, a very old and very good decentralist idea. For Thomas Jefferson, the incarnation of the ideology mentioned by Alexander, the United States needed to be broken into small independent wards to guard its people from steamrolling by the unaccountable, centralized power of the nation state emerging in his time.

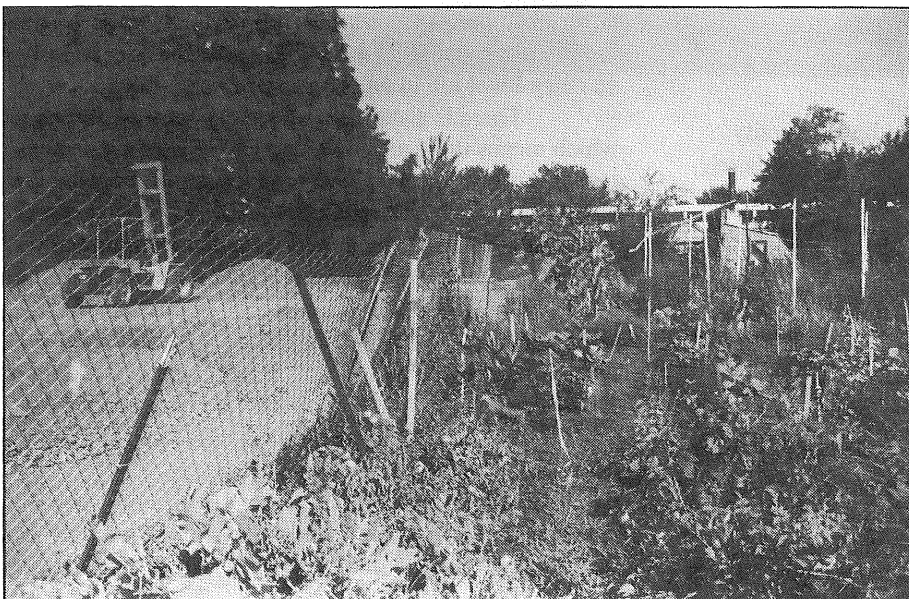
Unfortunately, Alexander's pattern "Independent Regions" does not suggest how to achieve decentralized politics when most of the world is already heavily centralized. "Gaining Independence" is a much tougher problem, and there is no pattern for it in Alexander's book.

## Independence and Participation

The majority of the student body has no idea that the University is carrying out a planning experiment. The faculty and staff generally understand their rights under The Experiment — many of the principles of planning are understood by anyone who stays on the campus for very long.



*A victim of small-group decisions. Most people had no idea that the Urban Farm project was being halved by building construction.*



The students, however, do not know that they can initiate projects. Certainly schoolwork and play interfere with participation, and their brief stay in town hinders their interest in long-term planning. But they are apathetic in part because no one asks them anything.

The administration does not generally give to the campus community the political power to make decisions. Recently, despite overwhelming disapproval, the administration banned a rock group, The Grateful Dead, from playing on campus. At a public relations "meet the University President" chat with students, the President responded to criticism with patronizing generalizations and bureaucratic doubletalk: the band was not banned, its contract simply was not renewed. This was damage control for an administration that did not want to defend the Dead from people who complain about deadheads. If, however, the band was granted permission to play through a campus-wide vote, the administration would have a mandate to allow the performances.

At the University, a small committee will talk about a problem until they are sick of it, while others who would be keenly interested do not even know that it is being discussed. The fault does not lie with those who are supposed to disseminate this news.

Responsibility lies with the very process of making decisions exclusively in small user groups. It is nearly impossible to reach out to everyone who might be interested. If instead the entire campus community was regularly informed and asked to make decisions, planning meetings would run very differently. More evidence would be brought before the public, and committee members could not rely solely on their own opinions.

There are some projects that have been pulled out of The Experiment's planning process altogether. A small band of patricians has taken it upon themselves to spend millions of dollars from city and University funds to build a high-tech research park. Financially, parks like this are failing all over the country, but these lessons go unheeded, and public hearings on whether or not to build have long since stopped. This kind of arrogance would be much less likely if the whole campus community was regularly informed and asked to vote on policy.

Those responsible for running the University assume, without evidence, that there must be high level, autocratic, administrative decision-makers on a campus of some 20,000 people. Of course, this assumption reflects power structures both inside and outside the campus. The campus community could publicly prioritize problems, and everyone would know that specific user subcommittees were forming. Committees could then justifiably make decisions within their own domain. As it is, the administrators are responsible to the state for their jobs, which means in practice that they are uninterested in encouraging students to make decisions.

The Neighborhoods surrounding campus also need a say in both University and city affairs. The University has been mostly accommodating to neighborhood groups,

but issues involving the city are nightmares. Tiny committees working "within the system" on tiny aspects of major problems have no way of coping with the city without political mandates. Their impotence is directly visible in issues of transportation and housing.

## *In Loco Parentis* -- Housing, transport and neighborhoods

Before the 1960's, the University had a stranglehold on student activity, where the school acted *in loco parentis*, in place of parents. With the cultural upheaval of the 1960's, the University dropped the policy, but the result was not only student freedom. Corporate consumerism was given a free hand. The limitation on bureaucratic interference did not come with limits on corporate interference. The neighborhoods surrounding the University have taken a severe pounding during the penetration of the student market, and the changes in student needs, since the 1970's.

*The University has stopped acting in place of parents, and Corporate America has tried to take the role.*

The University is a magnet to traffic in Eugene, being the town's single biggest business. But the automobile traffic, as distinct from pedestrian and bicycle traffic, stems from the inability of the immediately surrounding neighborhoods to provide housing, jobs, services and other marks of a community. Students often have jobs, and with tight schedules many must drive to school. Their jobs may require a car, and they are in little position to argue from an entry-level job in an economy in recession.

There is a shortage of parking on the campus, which means there are too many cars. There are a spectacular number of bicycle riders on campus, because the campus proper is nearly impossible to get around by car. But when parking is tight, how can the campus community encourage more alternative transport when the surrounding community is built for automobiles? In Eugene, like in most of the US, shopping, child care, jobs and residential neighborhoods are all miles from each other. The Oregon Experiment fights to maintain a small, integrated, pedestrian community in the middle of a high-speed, far-flung suburbia.

The influence of the University community is behind the building of bicycle paths and the maintenance of bus routes throughout Eugene. But these facilities do not

offer an alternative to people stuck in the town economy.

Changing this is a political problem: no one can or should force a change in lifestyle on those to whom the car has become a necessity. These people are victims of the economy, and their reaction to parking restrictions is rarely to encourage transportation alternatives. Instead there has to be broad recognition of the problem, and concerted action taken to gradually change the layout of the town. Unfortunately, the city government is calling for more sprawl, not less.

The most promising political units for action against the city are the neighborhood groups. Eugene, a city of about 100,000 people, is officially divided into 19 neighborhoods. The groups most sympathetic to making structural changes are the 3 surrounding the University. But to implement the necessary changes, they need some control over their own districts, and some of their own tax money.

Wresting control and money from city, county, state and federal government is a problem familiar to most advocates of social change. Although Alexander has no pattern for effecting political change, The Experiment has helped to provide a forum for these issues.

## The Gap Between Ideology and Reality

Christopher Alexander is not the first person to feel that "people can only have a genuine effect on local government when the units of local government are autonomous, self-governing, self-budgeting communities, which are small..." Politicians, administrators, financiers and big business executives are not threatened by Alexander's preference for independent and democratic communities. After all, independence is already part of the ideology in this country.

But there is little autonomy or democracy at the University, or in the surrounding political regions for that matter. This is not necessarily an ideological deficiency.

National ideologies are so abstract that it is easy to believe that they reflect reality. The bureaucracies of modern nations rule with impunity by keeping a great distance between the people and the Capital, center of decisions and rhetoric. It is easier to fool people at a distance.

In the community of a college campus, however, it is a little harder to fool people. Faculty and their students have some time to examine problems close at hand, and Alexander helped to create regulations to allow their

participation. But the regulations have not led to direct democracy, only a very distant representative democracy.

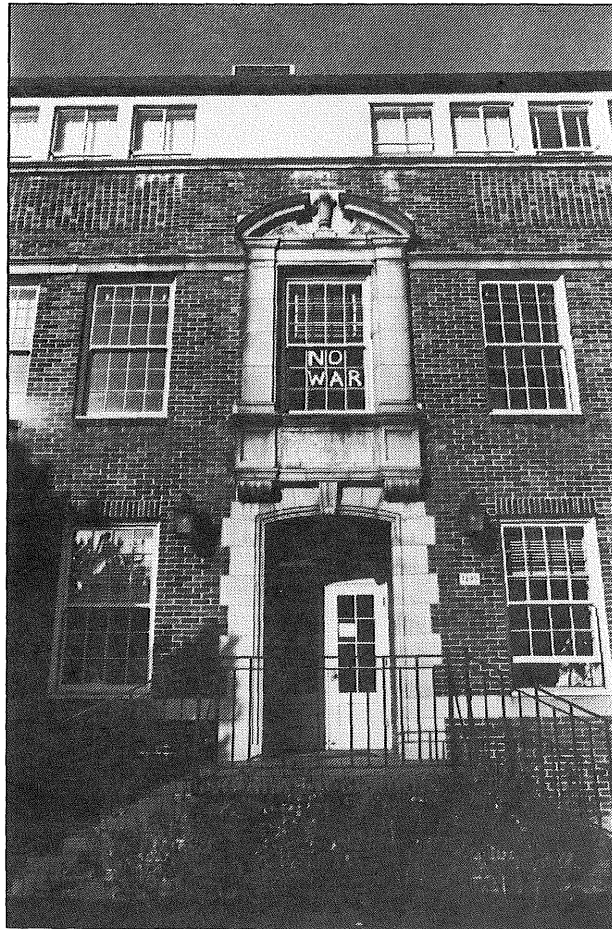
The transition from an ideology to a working system of full participation, a genuine community and culture of egalitarianism, would be a great leap at any University. Hierarchical and authoritarian relationships are the norm at schools with the authority of accreditation. This limits equitable discussion.

The resulting curricula are irrelevant to most students. Everywhere on campus, near graduation time, students can be overheard expressing disappointment in the direction offered by the University. These students, and not only the star pupils, will be citizens shaping the future. Does The Oregon Experiment do anything for them?

Although there is little opportunity for students to participate in direct

democracy, people who on many campuses might not interact are talking more, collaborating to resolve issues. This is certainly something that would be part of Utopia University, so it is probably unnecessarily contentious to claim that the implementation of The Experiment only proceeded as far as needed to keep campus activism cooled to below the revolutionary boiling point.

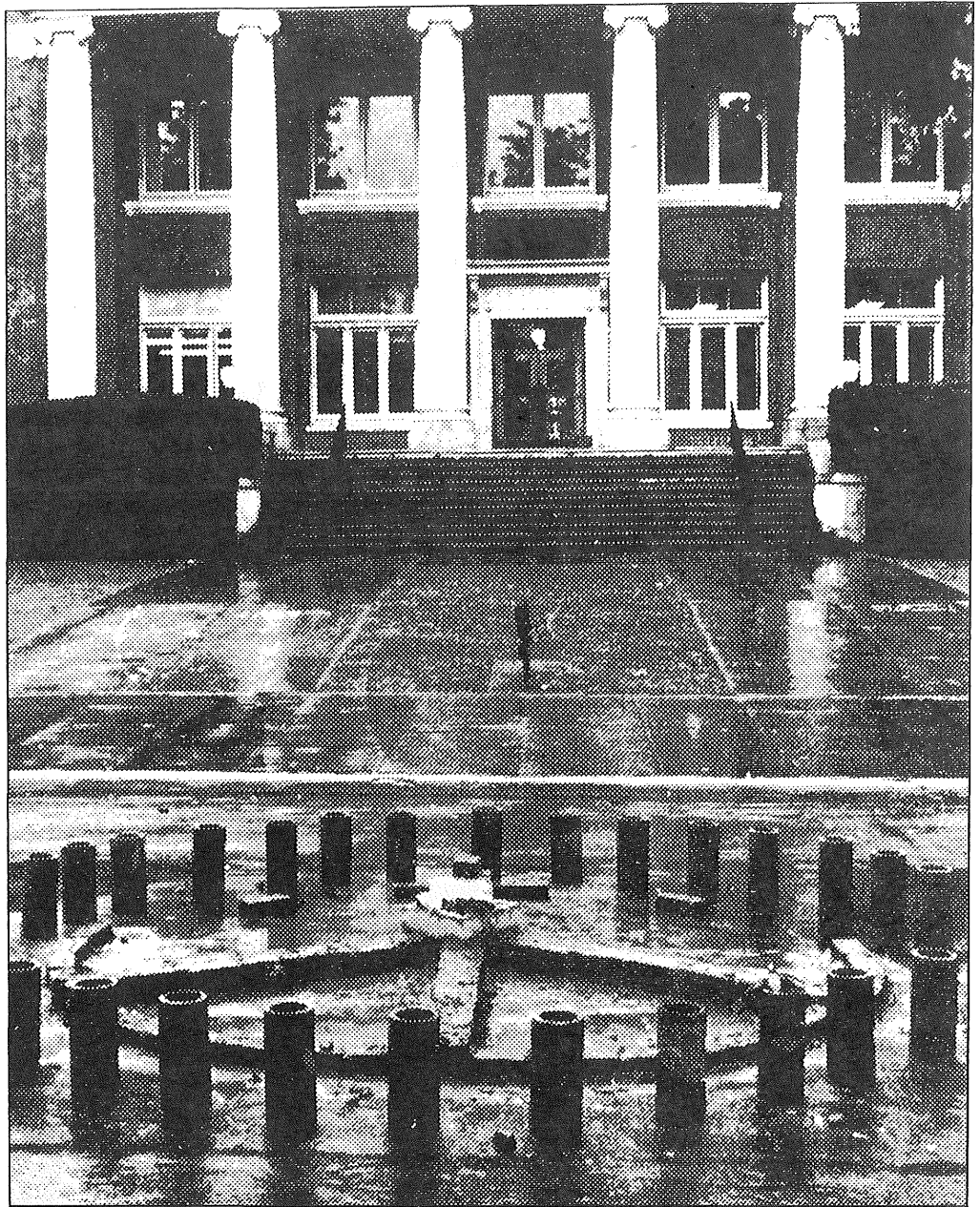
Protests on campus today are happily plentiful. There are many more issues to be discussed than the ones in the planning office, such as the University's social role, its elitism, and its increasingly warped, establishment curriculum. The Oregon Experiment has made the work ahead a little easier.





## April and May, 1970

Buildings at the University of Oregon took on new political meaning in April of 1970. The Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) headquarters had been bombed, set fire to, and rioted in front of so much that in April the faculty nearly removed it from campus just to keep the peace. Some buildings, named after those who fought against the ROTC in 1915, became symbols: Oswald Garrison Villard and Prince Lucien Campbell were University administrators at the time the ROTC was forced into their academic program, becoming the only department run by an actual employer.





The draft made students study the war. The Student Body President visited Hanoi. The campus paper published endless essays and articles about the war. One of the faculty, John Froines, was on trial as one of the Chicago Eight.

It became clear to many that the US was fighting against the vast majority of the Vietnamese people, and slaughtering them ostensibly for an economic philosophy. But how can students stop an establishment out of control? Academic buildings became territory in the battle against the system.

The massive, ugly science complex, built as part of the huge reaction to Sputnik, became symbols of technological and corporate devastation just as Apollo 13, also Sputnik spawn, came limping back to the first Earth Day. That April 22 saw a massive sit-in at the Administration Building, Johnson Hall.

The Earth Day sit-in ended with the arrival of the Police, Sheriff and National Guard. Tear gas was used against a gathering, curious crowd. Jack Nicholson, on campus directing Drive, He Said after his Easy Rider success, filmed the riot and had one of his actors play at leading students into the fray. Sixty-one students were arrested that night, and Jack promised to bail them out. He reneged.

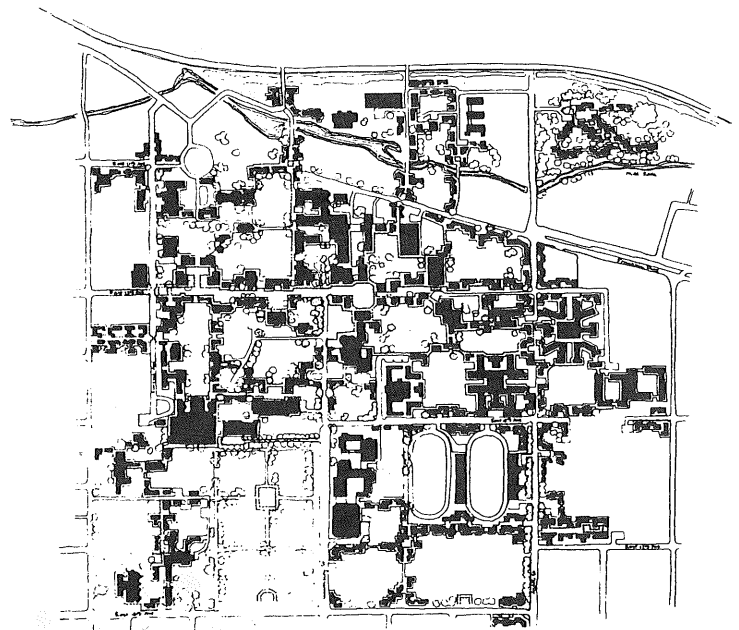
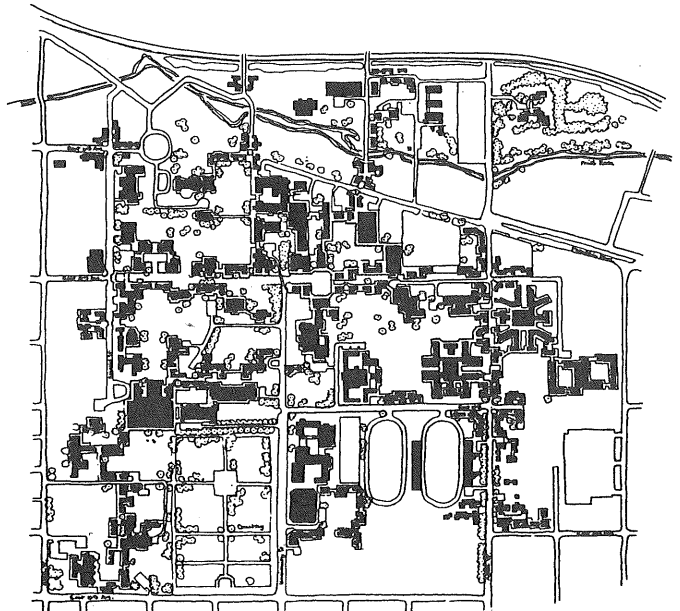
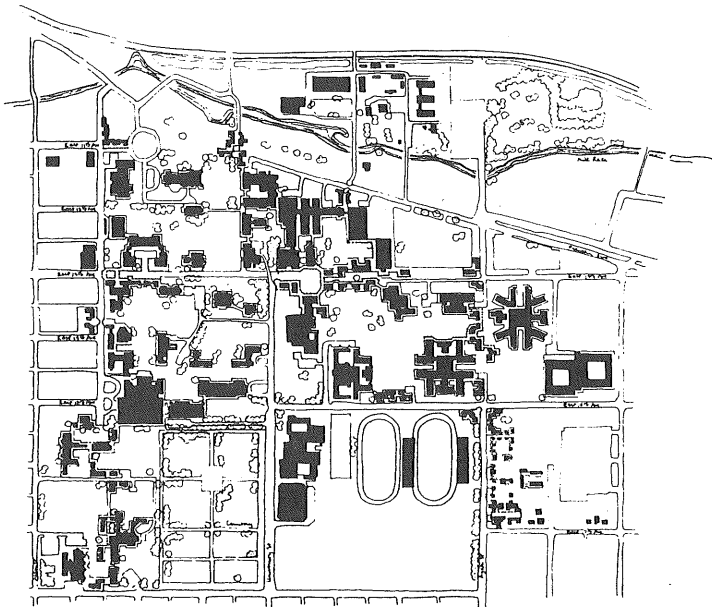
The street in front of Johnson Hall was then barricaded from traffic by protesters. Most people thought this was a good idea. Oregon was the only University in the country where a student might be killed by a log truck while walking between classes. After negotiating with the city, the street stayed closed permanently.

At the end of April, when Nixon approved the invasion of Cambodia, another sit-in at Johnson hall, riots, fires and cancelled concerts were in the news. Then, on May 4, four student protestors were shot by the National Guard at Kent State. Two days of protest later, the U of O faculty votes against the war, and the University President, Robert Clark, stunned by the deaths at Kent State, suspends classes for two vigorous days of teach-ins.

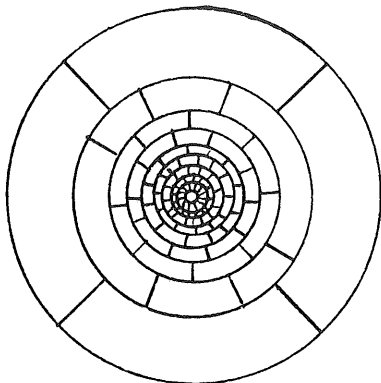
Classes continue after this, while other universities around the country close for the school year. The following Fall, 18-year-olds get the vote and Christopher Alexander arrives at the University of Oregon.



# Decentralized Systems

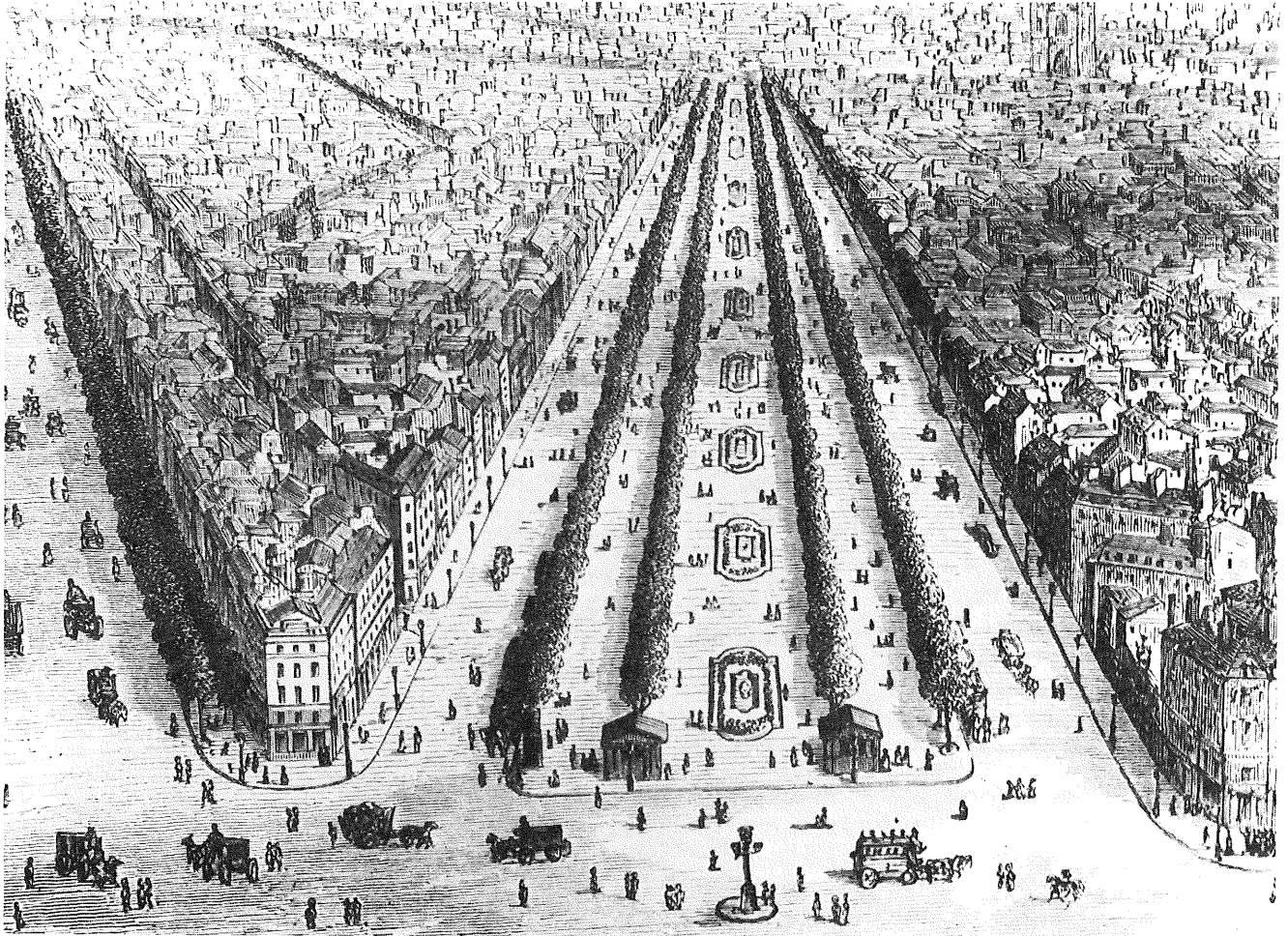


In order to create small-scale growth at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Christopher Alexander suggested a system of categories for projects. For example, in any given year there should be 1000 small projects, 100 medium-sized projects, and 10 large ones. The idea was to simulate the efficient, innovative piecemeal growth visible in places with few resources. In practice, the University now lumps many small projects together into large programs, or else funds the project from maintenance budget. Alexander was trying to fragment the allocation of funds — trying to create a fractal by building at different scales.



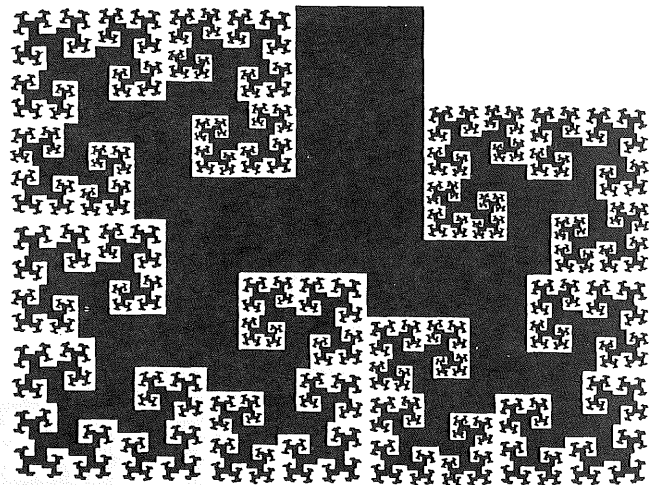
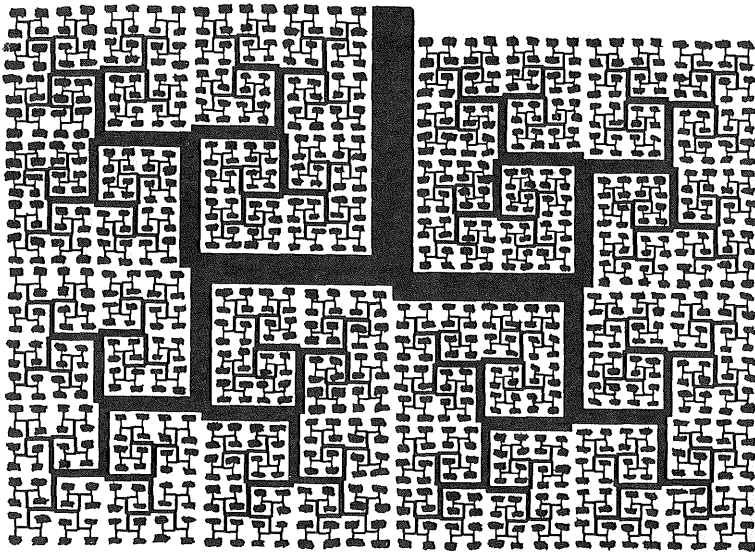
Natural fractals are not mysterious. Similarities at different scales indicate some diminishing influence, say an explosion, traveling throughout a homogeneous system, say ice. The same material will break in the same way, but to an extent depending on the force that reaches it. In nature, this effect disappears as we reach the limits of the force or the material. This is why mathematical fractals such as the Mandelbrot Set, in which the same patterns appear at any scale, are pure fantasy. They do not even exist in the colorful graphics simulations of computers: a real computer cannot enumerate an infinite set. Fractal fantasies are a distraction from the real world, where differences at different scales are most crucial.





Above: Another fractal down. In the 1850's, Paris prefect Eugène-Georges Haussmann carved these boulevards through dense working-class neighborhoods for the benefit of the upper middle class. The doomed communities had human-scale architecture and a robust culture, but were unprotected from large-scale finance.

Human-level decentralization. Political and economic decentralization, as shown in the space-filling tree below left, must include mutual support among like-minded communities. Today, in contrast (below right), the world economy and its supporting institutions sap nearly all production and resources for the benefit of a few.



## The Cycle Column: Working Bikes

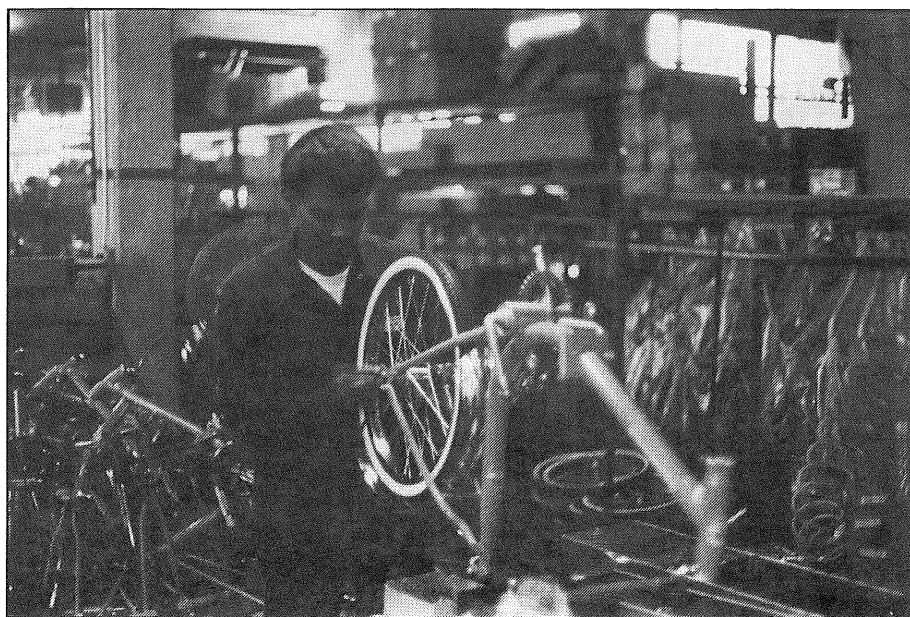
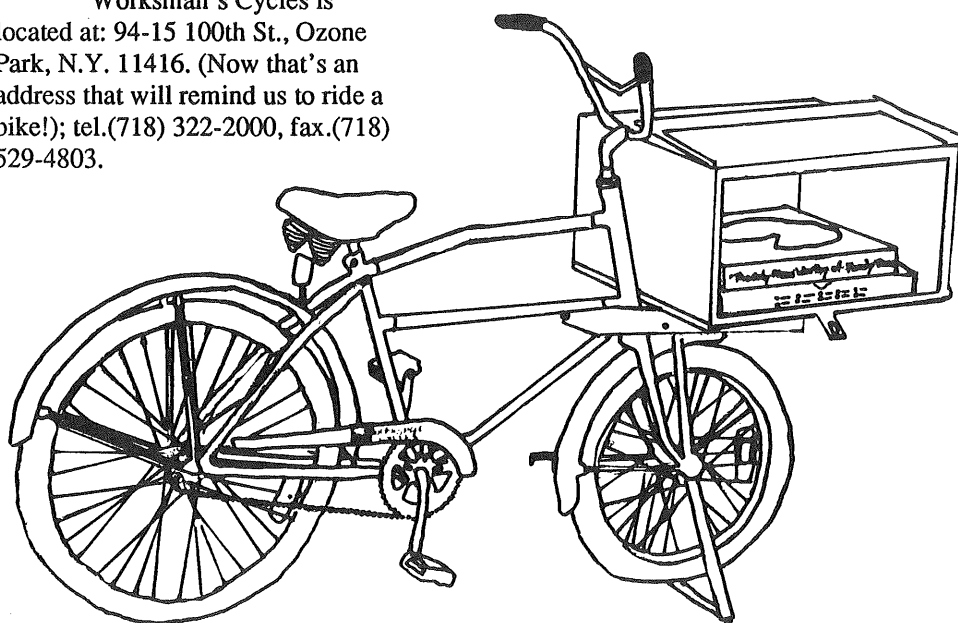
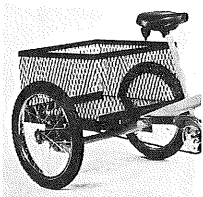
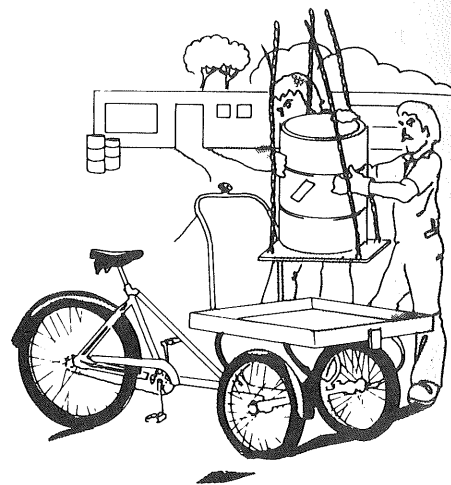
The bicycle and tricycle's versatility and efficiency have long been recognized in less wealthy countries than our own. Although bikes and trikes are considered toys by US government economists, many people use them for transportation. We visited a little cycle company in Ozone Park, N.Y. whose products have found their way into the otherwise energy-intensive factory environment.

Worksman Cycles Corporation is a small but innovative operation, building their bikes from scratch in their Ozone Park factory. Besides making an assortment of sturdy recreational bikes and trikes, they make extra heavy duty cycles able to

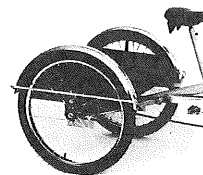
carry a load of up to one-fourth of a ton. These are used for transporting people and material in government agencies, factories, foundries, airports, refineries, shopping malls, amusement parks, apartment complexes, construction sites and shipyards. The buyers of these human-powered vehicles benefit from lower indoor pollution levels and decreased repair and operation costs. Even big corporations use them (Chrysler, Exxon, General Motors, and others).

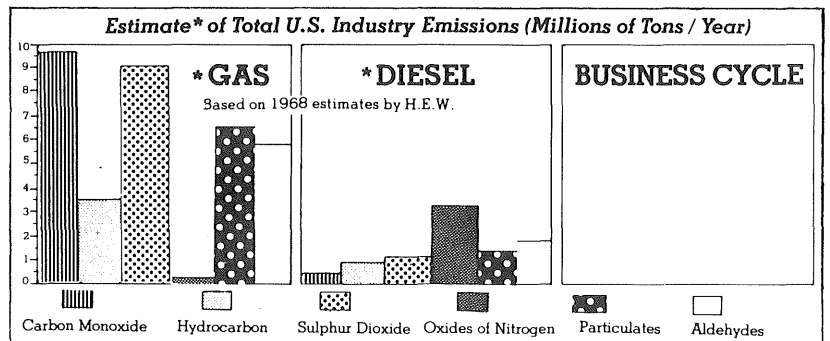
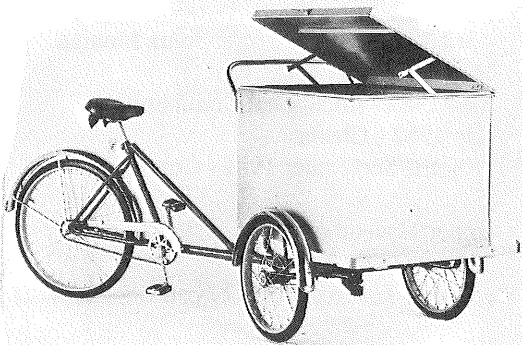
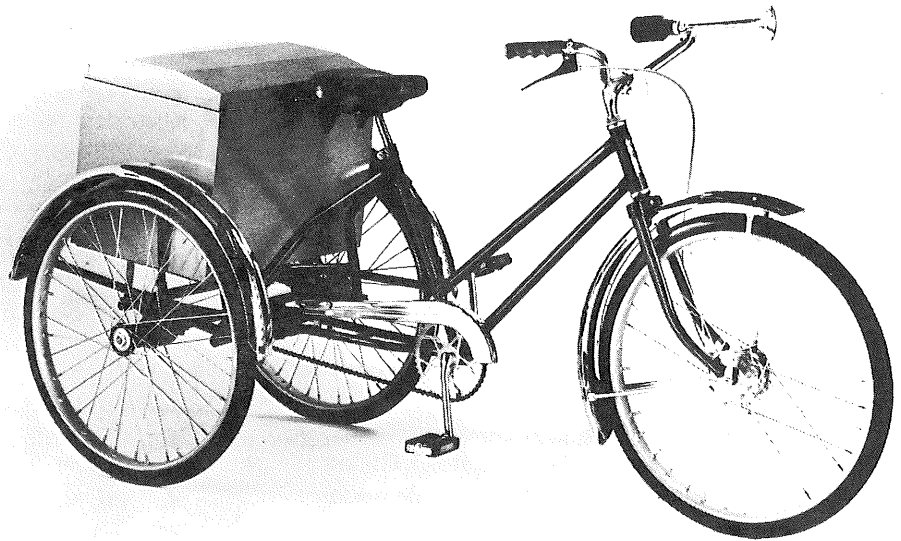
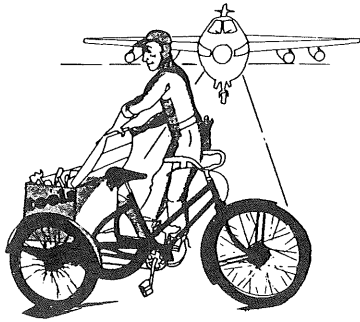
The Northwest distributor of Worksman Cycle's is: Seattle Bicycle Supply, Kent, WA 98032; tel.(206) 251-1516.

Worksman's Cycles is located at: 94-15 100th St., Ozone Park, N.Y. 11416. (Now that's an address that will remind us to ride a bike!); tel.(718) 322-2000, fax.(718) 529-4803.

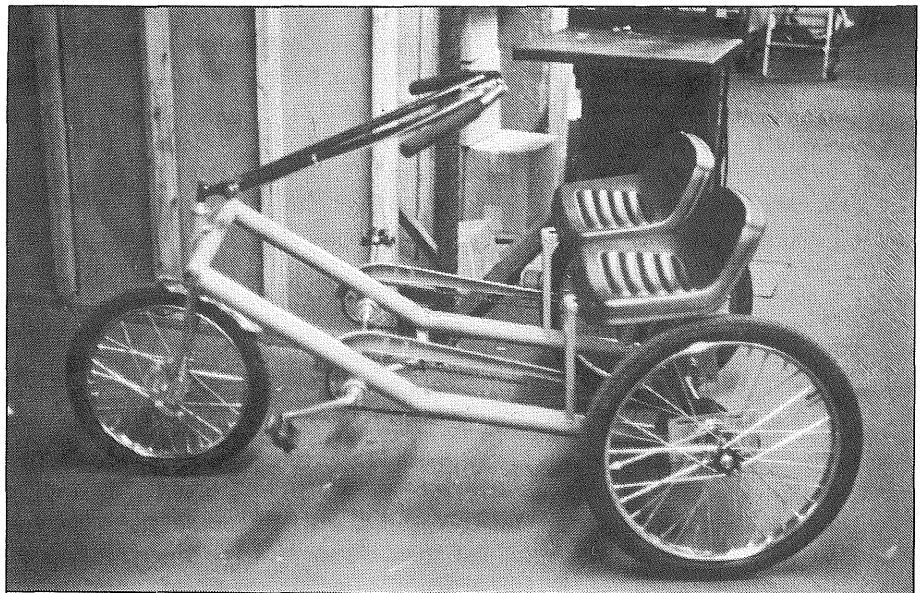
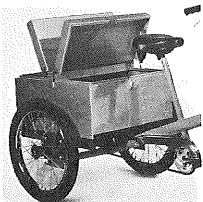


*Worksman bikes are built in a working class neighborhood, Ozone Park, in Queens, a borough of New York City. The company is very proud of their cycles, which they have been building since 1898, including the only folding bike made in the United States.*





*A new Workman design: a very sturdy two-passenger tricycle.*





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Letters and unsolicited submissions accepted, but we can't pay anything just now. Include SASE if you would like material returned.

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# A note to Librarians on RAIN and TRANET

As RAIN was vanishing in 1987 it made a ghostly appearance in TRANET, the terrific international networking magazine for ecopolitico-socio-activists. TRANET's staff worked even more tirelessly than usual in taking over RAIN's subscription obligations. This is a debt difficult to repay.

The RAIN masthead appeared on the front page of TRANET, along with the TRANET logo. Through this merger, both RAIN Volumes and TRANET numbers incremented, even though RAIN, in all but name, had disappeared.

Any good library should carry TRANET, and since the TRANET/RAIN issues have TRANET numbers, the revived RAIN is starting with Volume Fourteen, Number one — one volume after the last independent issue of RAIN. The confusion can be alleviated by treating the TRANET/RAIN issues as issues of TRANET, not of RAIN, as the contents of those issues will reveal upon examination.

TRANET is \$30/year (\$50/year for libraries)  
TRANET, PO Box 567, Rangeley ME 04970, USA.

## What is RAIN?

RAIN began, in 1974, as a networking tool for ecologists. It quickly became, and was subtitled, a "Journal of Appropriate Technology", and played a role in defining what that phrase might mean. Later still, it took as subtitle "Resources for Building Community". Much of the time the collective staff dropped subtitles altogether, finding them

mildly oppressive.

RAIN is based in Oregon, and its name comes from one of the most prominent features of the Cascadia bioregion. Rain The Weather is a dependable member of the ecology here, and RAIN The Magazine became important to many who studied ecology and worked for social change.

The Appropriate Technology Sourcebook (Darrow and Saxenian, . Volunteers in Asia Press), reviewed RAIN: "The Staff is committed to unearthing the best, serious documentation supporting arguments for environmentally sound, decentralized human-scale technology..."

A Trumpet to Arms (Armstrong, South End Press) found that "not only is RAIN strong on clear, usable how-to features, but it also includes...social/political overviews of technology". A coeditor at the time, Carlotta Colette, felt that RAIN defines "alternative technology as more than just equipment. The best technology is a good society."

For years it carried variations on this self-description: "RAIN magazine publishes information that can help people live simple and satisfying lives, make their communities and regions economically self-reliant, and build a society that is durable, just, amusing and ecologically sound."

RAIN the magazine is needed more than ever today. During a brief publishing hiatus of five years, ecological and community destruction, social injustice, alienation, isolation, imperialism and domination have not gone away. At RAIN we explore the possibilities and the examples, research the alternatives to old-school socialism, rapacious capitalism, technocracy, tyranny and megacorporate culture that promotes greed, violence and persecution.

There are ways out of this mess. Good things do happen. But how have they happened, and how are they relevant today? This is what the magazine is about. The working details of making a better future.



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