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An Alternative Conception of Politics in the Federation of Damanhur and Auroville:

Politicization of Ecological, Spiritual and Social Ambitions

Formation of new types of political experiences in intentional communities, such as the Federation of Damanhur and Auroville whose active residents do not participate in the modern political field, results in an alternative conception of politics. This conception of politics, which is created through the daily participation of active Damanhurians and Aurovillians in community life and their adoption of consensus decision-making at these communities, diverges from the representative democratic systems. I spent two weeks in each community as a participant observer. I interviewed 7 active residents in each community and asked them questions about their life trajectories. I found out that many of their active residents had never been engaged in any kind of political movement prior to their relocation. They had always been looking for alternative ways of life, but they had never gotten politically engaged to reach their social, spiritual and ecological ambitions. By social, spiritual and ecological ambitions I mean their unceasing willingness to live among a group of people who share similar goals such as caring for each other, adopting a less materialized and more spiritual way of life, and respecting nature. Active Damanhurians and Aurovillians mentioned these ambitions as their major reasons for moving to these communities, and not political ambitions. They moved to these communities to fulfil these ambitions which have found their echo in the community life in Damanhur and Auroville.

Although they did not have political ambitions before their relocation, by creating these intentional communities where individuals can become the subjects of daily politics in their regions, they have given birth to an alternative conception of political engagement and activity which is no longer based on representative democracy with its whole administro-

political institutions. In fact, this conception comes from the everyday experience of communal way of life and the practice of consensus decision-making in these intentional communities where individuals can represent themselves without having the need of delegating others. These people adopt consensus decision-making and participate in the daily politics of the community and the region to realize their common goals and intentions meanwhile their ecological, spiritual and social ambitions are more and more fulfilled within this alternative conception of politics in their intentional communities. They have become the new political subjects of contemporary societies where social change would be achieved through their daily participation in community life.

In this paper, firstly I will argue that moving to Damanhur and Auroville has had a politicizing effect on their active residents who in general were not politically engaged prior to their relocation. Secondly, I will show how active Damanhurians and Aurovillians have detached themselves from representative democratic systems. Finally, I will assert that these intentional communities, which are functioning examples of daily participation in community life and practicing consensus decision-making, provide new sources for social change in contemporary societies.

Damanhur¹ was founded in 1975 in Northern Italy by Oberto Airaudi and his disciples from Turin. It is a spiritually-oriented community where active Damanhurians attempt to live in harmony with nature. There are currently around 600 residents who live in small *nucleos* of 15 to 25 people. Each *nucleo* specializes in a direction related to their environment. Active Damanhurians have access to a kindergarten, a primary school, a newspaper, various restaurants and bars, an organic supermarket and many other shops and businesses.

Auroville² was founded in 1968 in a deforested region near Pondicherry in Southern India. The Mother, a French woman, and her disciples, mostly young Europeans and Americans, wanted to establish a community based on the idea of Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, a spiritual leader for many Indians during the colonial times. They were also supported by UNESCO for this project. Their goal was to create a place that no nation could claim as its own, and therefore a place where the human unity could be achieved. Today there are around 3000 active residents in Auroville who come from more than fifty countries, mostly from India, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the U.S. Like active Damanhurians, they also have access to kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, various shops, restaurants and cafes in the community.

Politicization of ecological, spiritual and social ambitions

In these communities, the separation between different aspects of community life, such as social, spiritual and ecological ones, does not exist any longer. All these aspects are strictly interwoven in the organization of their daily lives. I define them as different categories only to be able to analyze the interrelationship between them. For example, spirituality finds its representation in respecting nature in Damanhur where the residents of Dendera, a *nucleo* in Damanhur, salute the tree in front of the main building of the community each time before leaving and upon arriving in the community. Another example may be found in Auroville where social ambitions such as the human unity and integrity are fulfilled within the context of Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo who seeks to combine spirituality and materialism in his philosophy. An American man, who moved to Damanhur 10 years ago, explains the interrelationship between spirituality and ecology in Damanhur as follows:

“Damanhur is only an eco-community as by default. It's not designed as an eco-community, it's a spiritual community. But as such you are in tune with nature, and as such you treat it properly. Ecology is sort of by-product of this spirituality here.”

I think that the communal way of life in these communities, where their active residents seek to satisfy their social, spiritual and ecological goals, has resulted in a by-product. After moving to these communities, they have become much more politicized, especially in the issues concerning their respective communities and regions. Even though social, spiritual and ecological ambitions were preponderant in their decision to relocate in these communities, these ambitions have played a politicizing role for their active residents after their resettlement. For instance, a Canadian woman, who was never interested in politics before her resettlement in Auroville, has become very much engaged in regional politics:

“In 2011, I participated in a demonstration here for the first time in my life because there was a lot of harassment and violence against women. So, on Women's Day we wanted to make the march, so that women feel safe to be able to walk around in the evenings... I even participated in a demonstration about a month ago. It was about a development project for apartment buildings... So, a large group of us got together and met on a Sunday. Then we demonstrated on Monday and they stopped the project. We just shut it down.”

This woman moved to Auroville because she wanted to live among a group of people who would be against any form of violence within the premises of the community. Having the first-hand experience of violence in the community has led her to get politicized for the first time in her life. She did not leave the community because of violent behaviors of other communarians, but she fought against violence with all her means because the community

life in Auroville has given her a kind of political power to realize her social ambitions and to fight for her ideals. This woman represents the two facets of the new political subject as Touraine describes it: a combination of personal liberty and community within her³. Her political power does not come from determined ways of political participation in contemporary societies such as voting, adhering to political parties and delegating others to represent one's or a group's interests. It is a by-product of the communal way of life in Damanhur and Auroville where individuals become the subjects of day-to-day politics of their communities and regions.

These two communities, despite their differences due to the characteristics of their active residents and environment, both share similar goals concerning the creation of an alternative way of life which includes social belonging, spirituality and environment-friendly practices in the organization of daily life. Although their active residents have never considered themselves as political activists, they have become politically engaged in the daily politics of their communities and regions. A Damanhurian, who moved to the community from Croatia two years ago, said that she has become much more engaged in politics than before. But of course, the sense of politics for her has also changed: it is no longer the politics dictated by existing groups and organizations, but the politics determined by her and her fellow Damanhurians' needs and ambitions:

“I changed my political opinions in a sense that I'm more politically active now than I was before.... More interested in politics, and more present in political life of Damanhur... It is not like the politics you see outside... I'm in the group of people who discuss what should be done, and how life would be better, like true politics.”

She had been uninterested in politics before her relocation because she could not resonate with the representative way of political activity in contemporary societies. She had not been willing to delegate others to fulfill her needs and ambitions or to solve her problems. That would not have included her in the decision-making process at all. Damanhur provided her a chance to fulfil her social, spiritual and ecological ambitions while she has become politically engaged in her community and region. As a by-product of community life, this politicization has been prominent for many active Aurovillians and Damanhurians who no longer attempt to participate in representative democratic systems, but create their own ways of political participation.

Divergence from representative democracy

This alternative conception of politics which touches the daily life of everyone in these communities is not based on representative democracy and its institutional ways of political participation. It rather transcends this dominant political paradigm. Active Aurovillians and Damanhurians practice a new form of political participation which is based on consensus decision-making and daily participation in community life. Apart from having a politicizing role on politically disengaged people prior to their relocation, this new conception of politics has also transformed politically engaged people's way of participation following their resettlement. For instance, an active Aurovillian woman from Spain was a leftist activist prior to her relocation and she was convinced about the need for political action to achieve social change in society. Now, she has completely changed her opinions:

“Before I was more political because I thought it was from there that I could change something... Here if I will meet that me and tell what I feel about changing the world, that

me would look at me and would think oh my God what a washed-brain, because now for me it's only when we change each one of us the world is going to change. I cannot go and change... Here I'm involved at the individual level. In the community, I am the person who is in charge of the recycling. I try to make the people aware. With the children in the classes I share new stuff.”

Active Damanhurians and Aurovillians are still not included in the modern political field in the sense of determined ways of political participation such as voting, adhering to political parties and delegating others for political issues concerning them and their towns, cities, regions or countries. They are not satisfied with what the existing models of representative democracies offer them. They are not revolutionaries who want to overthrow the existing political system to establish their own domination on others neither. On the contrary, they found or join these communities because they believe in the direct participation of individuals in the issues concerning their daily lives. They do not need to delegate others to represent them. They have moved to these communities following their search for an alternative way of life. They have taken control of their own needs and ambitions by participating in the daily life in these communities where they are among a group of people with similar needs, interests and goals. Therefore, they attempt to adopt consensus decision-making through which they can realize their goals and ambitions.

Consensus decision-making and daily participation in community life

Consensus decision-making has been prominent in many intentional communities all around the world⁴. Damanhur and Auroville are not the most striking examples of intentional communities where consensus decision-making is practiced at a high level. In fact, they both

have some sort of administrative committees which organize the daily functioning of the communities. So, it may be claimed that consensus decision-making plays a modest role in the organization of daily life in these communities. However, they still attempt to adopt consensus decision-making within their small communities, called *nucleos* in Damanhur, to make decisions. For instance, various small communities within these intentional communities meet every week or so to discuss and reach an agreement on specific questions concerning their own communities. As Lijphart argues, whilst consensus democracy functions insufficiently, it may still create a more consensual political culture⁵. I think it is the case in these communities too. So, despite not being intentional communities operating on the sole basis of consensus decision-making, their limited practice of consensus decision-making furnishes them a broader application of consensus in their daily lives. Active Damanhurians and Aurovillians are very pragmatic in the sense that they do not insist on adopting solely consensus decision-making, but use it whenever and wherever it can help them fulfill their needs and achieve their ambitions.

Besides practicing consensus decision-making, due to the politicizing effect of community life on their social, spiritual and ecological ambitions following their resettlement in these communities, I argue that these people have become the new political subjects of contemporary societies. They try to control and shape their daily lives without having the need of delegation for the functioning of their communities. Their social, spiritual and ecological ambitions are being fulfilled within the communities through their daily participation in the issues concerning their own lives. This daily participation creates a politicizing effect for the active residents of these communities who had never been engaged in any kind of political activity within contemporary societies based on representative democratic systems prior to their relocation.

In conclusion, their community life has resulted in the birth of an alternative conception of politics within the premises of their communities and/or regions which transcends the dominant political paradigm in contemporary societies. The latter has been promoting representative democracy and representative way of political participation for many years in modern societies. Even though they had never been critical of this approach, their community life in Damanhur and Auroville has resulted in an alternative conception of political participation. I think that this alternative conception of politics would play a crucial role in achieving social change in contemporary societies where representative democracies have entered a period of crisis during which there is an increase in abstention rates in many countries around the world⁶, an increase of populist politicians, and the triumph of political parties and/or politicians with anti-democratic programs as they are discussed in a recently published book, *The Great Regression*⁷. The alternative conception of politics created in these communities and in many other intentional communities furnishes a new hope for social change in contemporary societies as it not only transcends the problems of delegation and representative democracy, but also provides functioning examples of daily participation and consensus decision-making within the intentional communities and regions. It can be very useful to overcome the current crisis of representative democracies all around the world if companies, public and private institutions, political parties, NGOs, local communities and various groups of people start to practice what these communities offer them as functioning examples of daily participation and consensus decision-making.

¹ See <http://www.damanhur.org/en> for more information on the history of the Federation of Damanhur.

² See <http://www.auroville.org/> for more information on the history of Auroville.

³ Alain Touraine, *Critique de la Modernité* (Paris: Les Éditions Fayard, 1992), 352.

⁴ Mary Ann Renz, “Paving Consensus: Enacting, Challenging, and Revising the Consensus Process in a Cohousing Community,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 34(2) (2006): 164.

⁵ Arend Lijphart, “Consensus and Consensus Democracy: Cultural, Structural, Functional, and Rational-choice Explanations,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 21(2) (1998): 107.

⁶ See Figure 8.4 in the World Bank, *World Development Report: Governance and the Law* (The World Bank, 2017), 228.

⁷ Heinrich Geiselberger ed., *The Great Regression* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).