

## HOW OPERATION BOOTSTRAPS BEGAN

(Edited excerpts from:

(An interview with one of its originators: dated August, 1992)

How exactly did you start off?

Well, three of us just thought it was crazy having lots of unemployed people around here, all living way under the poverty line, all pretty bored, and certainly finding it very difficult to get lots of things that are really very easy to produce.

Such as?

Bread. That's what we started with. We just bought some flour and started baking bread in our own kitchen, and selling it at about cost price to people like us, people without much money. Before long we had a few other houses baking and about 20 unemployed people had become involved and were working at buying, baking and delivering, mostly for only a few hours a week each.

Did they receive pay?

At first we paid ourselves in bread. You see the basic idea was just for people with lots of time and labour to produce for themselves some important things they need. Later we started recording time contributed and sharing output and surpluses accordingly. This meant that various people could get some "work" with us from time to time. People could drop in and work for an hour or two and be paid in goods produced, although many were coming along mainly for something to do. So we were providing some work and some goods to poor people outside our base group, completely outside the mainstream cash economy.

Did you sell to other people?

Yes. We set two prices. One was as low as possible for people without a job, and we went around the neighbourhood selling the surpluses we could easily produce, and selling them at a bit under the ordinary price. We soon had lots of regular buyers in surrounding houses, mainly because our bread was fresh and crisp and usually we were delivering to people at home hot from the oven; they can't do that from the big central bakeries!

But that must have been very labour intensive and inefficient.

You couldn't really have competed with the big bakeries.

Of course they could mass produce bread much more cheaply than we could. But that's irrelevant. Our first purpose was to produce for ourselves. We had very little money and very much time, so we just started making this basic necessity, bread, for ourselves. In fact you could argue that the longer it took and the more inefficient it was, the better, because it was an enjoyable way to pass the time! There was nothing else much to do. We worked together so there was plenty of chat and mucking around. So we had something to do, and what's more, there was a sense of doing something productive and worthwhile - and that made our situation very different to the boring and useless time we'd had before.

Now it boomed along, but why didn't you keep expanding?

Because we reached a comfortable scale of operations for us. Our basic group plus drifters was manageable at about 20. We could all keep our minds on all aspects of the operation. We could get around to buyers on foot.

And this was when you started the second group?

Yes. We didn't start it though: A few people living 5 blocks away decided to do what we were doing, so we explained to them what we had learnt and went over now and then to help them get going.

And before long others started up here and there?

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get into the gift and ornament and house decoration areas? There must have been lots of crafts like this, especially jewellery, that you could have easily set up in your workshop?

But they are luxuries. They are trinkets for the rich. What we are about is producing socially useful things, and producing mostly by us for our own use. To get into the trendy gift market is to join one of the worst aspects of the conventional economy; providing expensive non-necessities that poor people can't afford and do not need. Of course, I'm not attacking unemployed people who find they can survive by selling craft stuff, decorations etc., because there isn't much else an individual can do. But we are about

Yes. The idea was for each group to keep itself small and manageable and operating just in their local area, and as soon as enough people nearby had become interested, to get some of them to start another group close by.

So what happened next?

The vegetable side of the operation. At first we just used our own backyards to produce for ourselves basic vegetable crops, and some fruit from a few

something quite different.

Don't you ever find you have too many pots being produced and not enough spinach, because everyone would rather fiddle with clay than dig in the garden?

Not really. We have a big board where we chalk up rough statements of what's being done and what's needed, and things coming up, like peaches will need bottling next week. Everyone knows the situation and most just get into what's top priority for a while and go back to their obsessions later. This is possible without any bureaucracy or "leaders", because we are a small group. No one has to be told to dig spuds, because we all know it needs to be done and it's important for the co-op to get it done, and there aren't many jobs that are boring if you all pitch in with a bunch of friends all yabbering away and making wisecracks all the time. Anyway, if you get sick of it you knock off and do it tomorrow.

Oh, and what about the fishing industry? How did you establish a fishing industry in a run-down industrial suburb miles from the sea?

Easy. We just set it up in the alley, beside the side door.

What do you mean?

Tanks. At first a few steel and concrete drums. Stocked them with a herd of tiddlers bought from a mail-supply firm, and told them to get on with it. Did you know about the crayfish side of the business.

No.

Take one plastic swimming pool, fill with water, add some baby crayfish, yabbies or marram. Tip your garbage into the pool regularly - and presto.

Now you can't do things like that without capital. I mean you had to borrow to buy things like fish to stock the tanks didn't you?

Well we sort of made our own capital.

Oh really. Do it yourself sandals I can grasp, but please tell me how you make your own capital.

Not make it really, so much as collect it. You see, there's tonnes of it lying around here isn't there?

Forgive me, but I hadn't noticed. What on earth are you talking about?

Put it this way. Within walking distance of where we are there is lots of cash sitting in wallets and drawers, doing nothing. Even in the pockets of unemployed people there are lots of dollars doing nothing, for a week or a month; not much in any one pocket, but in total a lot around this neighbourhood. And the people living around here, even the poor ones, actually have a huge total sum of money in the bank. What's it doing there?

I have no idea.

It's on loan to big companies so that they can invest in the development of stacks of unnecessary and socially undesirable products. So the task was to collect and to redirect as much of our meagre cash and savings as possible into our own "bank", to be used to do things we need done, and to invest in things of most benefit to us, like fish tanks. ...

Now how do you see yourselves as relating to mainstream society?

We see ourselves as building our way of life while conventional society goes its way. Some people move from our way back into the conventional race, and that's OK; we have at least supported some wrecks until they have got on their feet again. But most of us have no interest in the mainstream, partly because we know it hasn't got a place for all people like us, but mainly because our

way of life is better.

How can you say that when your material living standards are well under the poverty line?

Because we are increasingly able to provide ourselves with the basic things we need for a satisfactory material living standard. That standard is pretty low conventionally measured, but who cares. It is sufficient and comfortable, and we have some very important things you people in the conventional rat race don't have.

What are they?

We have interesting, worthwhile, satisfying work. We know that what we work at is socially valuable and we usually see people enjoying the products of our labour, and we can control our own work situation, e.g., we can start and stop work when we want to. Secondly we have security. We know that we can provide for ourselves, that we don't need banks and corporations, that as long as we have our vegetable patches and our labour and skills we can produce much of what we need, and that we can't be destroyed if the stock market or the dollar falls or interest rates rise, nor indeed if there is a depression. In fact, when you think about things like that we are much more secure than you mate! Especially when you consider our insurance cover.

How does that work?

Think of all the policies you have and how much the premiums cost you each year. Well our insurance cover is our community and networks and friends. If your roof blows off in a storm you will need lots of dollars for the insurance company. If mine blows off lots of people will be around immediately to help fix it up again.

Anything else?

Community. We are a tribe. We have our disagreements and difficulties of course, but basically we are a bunch of cooperating friends with very important common interests and tasks, and these give us a strong feeling of solidarity and comradeship. We know we are doing something important, each of us can see that he or she is making an important contribution to the welfare of all others here, each of us thinks about and takes some responsibility for our communal stuff, like the gardens, and for each other, and for the way the whole outfit is coming along.

So where to from here?

Well, as you know there are now movements like this in many countries. They have been developed partly spontaneously by people at the bottom of the heap because this is the only possibility for them, and partly through funding by the state, because governments know they just have to provide some assistance for the increasing millions that the conventional economy can't provide for. As automation increases and as mainstream society ties in itself into more and more serious problems, more and more people will turn to our sort of alternative. The only "development" solution, in rich countries and poor, is to build simple, cooperative local self-sufficiency. In other words, so that the people of Campbelltown are mostly engaged in the production of the things that they need for satisfactory living standards in Campbelltown.

Meaning that the era of intense trade and transport will come to a close?

Of course. You can only do that if there are tonnes of cheap energy around, or if you grab all there is. A sustainable future will have to be built on the bioregional concept; the idea that small regions must become highly self sufficient. And this means that all the people in the region can cooperate in doing the things necessary to provide for themselves, which can mean the end of unemployment, alienated labour and lots of other social problems.

And lots of middle class people are joining you now.

Especially since we have permanent part time work. They find it much more satisfying to work with use cooperatively, doing important varied things for our area, than grinding away in the company office all week.

And you are becoming a political force too.

We sure are. We have considerable numbers in our co-ops now and we are starting to get councils to listen to us. They fear that we will vote them out if they don't. So some are rezoning vacant lots and setting up workshops and advisory services and cheap credit and encouraging firms to set up small decentralised branches and organising local markets and recycling sites.