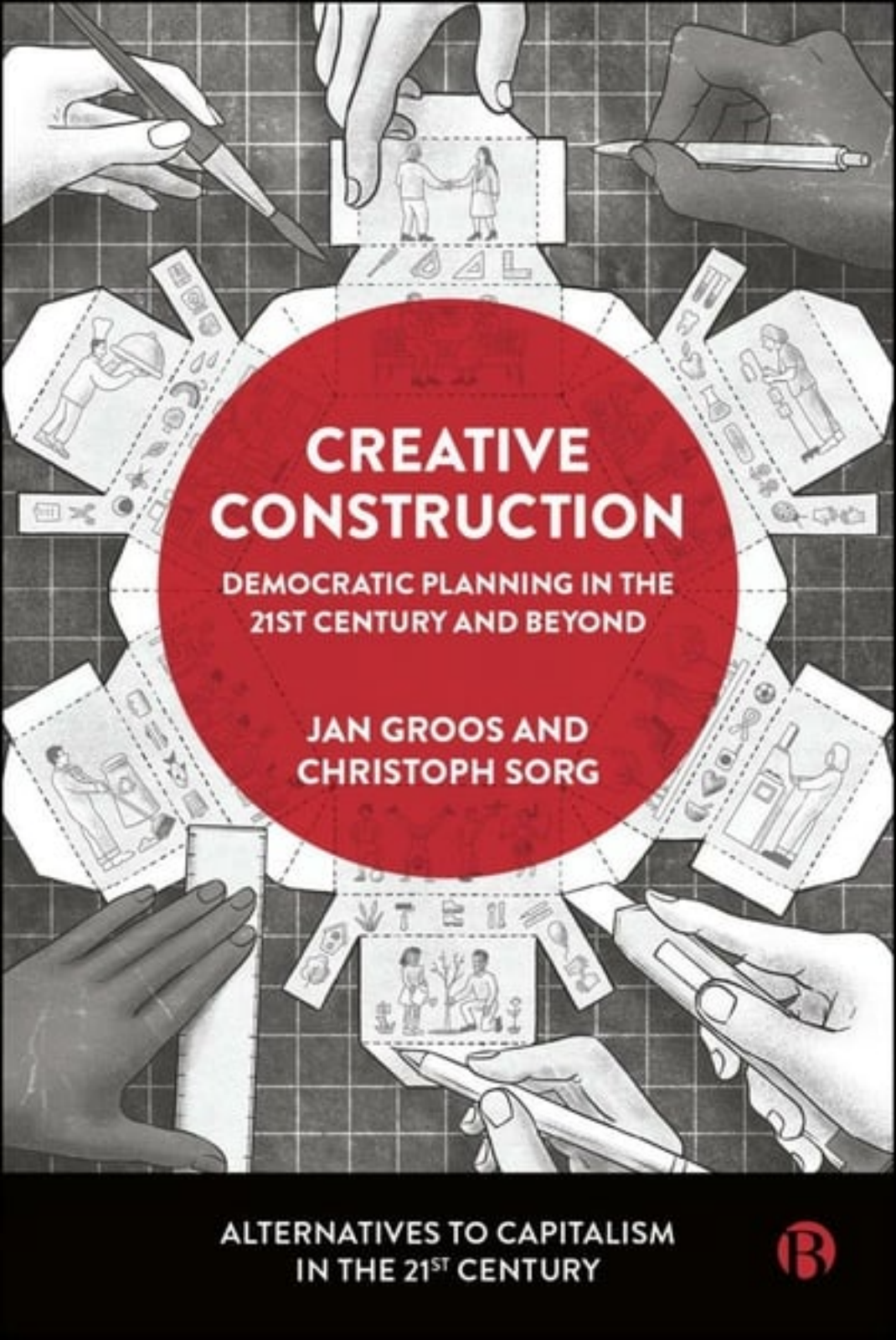




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CREATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Democratic Planning in the
21st Century and Beyond

Edited by
Jan Groos and Christoph Sorg

With a Foreword by
Kohei Saito

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Relational Revolutions

Eva von Redecker in conversation with Jan Groos

Introduction

The following is an edited transcript of an episode of the *Future Histories* podcast, run by Jan Groos.¹ Jan pursues *Future Histories* as a form of research practice and has, since starting the podcast in 2019, recorded a variety of episodes related to the topic of this book. While Eva von Redecker's main research focus is not on questions of democratic planning, she nonetheless engages with the topic frequently. Her work on interstitial revolutions, a temporal understanding of freedom and contemporary anti-capitalist struggles provides important insights for the broader debate about democratic planning.

The extended audio version of the conversation in German can be accessed through the link provided in the endnote.

Eva von Redecker in conversation with Jan Groos

Jan Groos:

Future Histories engages quite a lot with the question of democratic planning, and my feeling has always been that it is absolutely crucial for the planning debate to occupy two pillars: freedom and security. These two pillars cannot be thought of separately. I can only really have freedom if there is also existential security, for everyone, not just for me. Because if there is no existential security for others, I will always live in fear that those others could endanger my security. Perhaps we can also link this question of security and freedom with

the question of democratic planning. I know that you have been dealing with this on an ongoing basis. How can we think about that? What can such a production of freedom and security look like within the framework of democratic planning?

Eva von Redecker:

So, of course, it should be ecological and based on solidarity or, as I sometimes say, world-preserving. I am totally in favour of using freedom and security as important basic concepts. The concept of security has been hijacked by the right for much longer than the concept of freedom and I think it's absolutely right to not put up with that and to take these concepts back. In fact, the concept of security has the same problem as the concept of freedom, namely that it has been subordinated to the concept of property in liberal theory. In this derivative way it works for competitive capitalism, otherwise it wouldn't. You can observe this in Jeremy Bentham particularly clearly: he defines security via strongly secured property rights. Security then becomes the idea that I will be able to dispose of a good that already belongs to me in the future as well. That is actually an absurdly small portion of security and not, to use a metaphor, the canteen where I can always be provided for. That's why I think we have to try to think of security differently, namely from the perspective of sharing common goods, from the promise of mutual provision. Such provision will of course require time. If peoples' time is tied up in wage labour, with which they desperately try to provide for themselves by accumulating enough property for their own pension and their own future, then of course it doesn't work. Neither does it work if they have to constantly work against the fear of the future that you have just described so nicely. If others are not safe, then they have a good motivation to attack me and rob me of my stuff. That's

the world we live in, and this structural insecurity is something that the capitalist promise of security can't get rid of, except perhaps temporarily through the Leviathan, through punitive institutions. And the failure of law-and-order security gets hidden in racist population politics, which create a white sense of safety by exposing racialized groups to ever greater police brutality. So that is a radical loss of safety for the targeted groups, and a frenzied climate of fear for all. You cannot have real safety without solidarity.

One thing I sometimes ask in debates about material restraint is, 'What would you need to feel safe even though you no longer have a certain thing? What promise, what perspective might make you not need your own car anymore?' The answer might actually be something like occasionally being alone in the train compartment and nobody's bugging you, or something like that. These are often very particular things or particular needs that are guaranteed by property and the security that property provides. In this respect, the democratic aspect of planning would, first of all, be to repeatedly enquire about needs in a way that is actually open to outcomes. I believe that needs also change quite strongly when people have the feeling of living in peace and friendliness. In such a scenario there is certainly a much, much lower need for accumulating things. Provisioning would then look different, because it would be based more strongly on trust in solidarity-based systems (Winker and Neumann, in this volume). In this respect, I would say that separating the question of security from the question of property and a new adjustment to solidarity would be a recipe for success.

Jan Groos:

What would this look like in concrete terms? Is there a framework through which you think about democratic planning? Are there certain basic concepts that you have already

set out and that need to be worked on? Perhaps you already have concrete proposals for an approach to addressing the question of democratic planning? I would be very interested in that.

Eva von Redecker:

I think you always have to consider the level at which we are capable of acting and, depending on that, there are different paths. There is a centralist path, and that would mean that we would have governmental power at least at the national level. If that were the case, I think that even a minimal planning effort in the form of rationing, such as that now being propagated by Ulrike Herrmann (2022), for example, would make a tremendous difference, especially in terms of gaining the trust of the population in relation to justice and equality. If we had simply said during the energy crisis that everyone would get the same number of kilowatt hours for free, roughly enough for a small apartment, and above that it would be really expensive, then that would have already achieved a lot. Then no one who is already struggling would have to worry about their heating costs. So rationing can, I think, change a lot in terms of the overall societal feeling, because you get away from this resentment of always thinking that someone else is somehow doing better. But that would require the will of a government that wants to act and, unfortunately, there isn't one at the national level at the moment. There isn't even a party that has such a programme.

A glimpse of hope is the city of Graz. An example of socialism not in a country, but in a city. In Graz, the mayor is from the KPÖ [Communist Party of Austria], the very social democratic, but still communist, party of Austria. As a communist mayor at the municipal level you can't actually do anything – you can't simply expropriate and socialize, because you don't have the legal basis for that. And what did they do in Graz?

They have socialized their own salaries, that is the mayor herself and all employees of the city administration who are in the KPÖ capped their salaries at €1,900 net. This is still a decent salary, but they would have more otherwise. Everything that is above €1,900 goes into a social fund and so several million accumulate per year. This money is then given away quite unbureaucratically and quickly as an aid measure wherever there is urgent social need. Maybe this is not entirely democratic in the slightly non-procedural form, but it does promote the capacity for democracy to the extent that people can actually experience being helped with their problems individually and quickly. So even where you think socialization is not possible, there are possibilities.

I believe that the path to central planning that imagines to conquer the centre first – be it by election or by revolution – and then to start planning, is hopeless. At this historical moment, a lot depends on how far we manage to set up infrastructures for material solidarity and provisioning within social movements. But the models have to be scalable. It doesn't help to wait until you can implement something on a society-wide basis. We can start now with partial community care or even care for parts of society. But partial need not mean local. That is the great advantage of our real-time information technology.

I think we have to recognize the humble beginnings of planning, or else we have nothing to build upon. Think of forest occupations during which activists create wish lists of things that they need for their activities and then others come and deliver items from the lists. Such structures need to be scaled up, so that they don't just support a specific form of political action, but extend beyond that. It could allow activists to have an existential security beyond a given concrete

action in order for them to have time for activism, or facilitate world-preserving work, or help with reproduction and care work for each other, and so on. I think that creating such structures of care should actually be the primary goal for movements at this moment of relative powerlessness on the left. Movements that are working well demonstrate this. Black Lives Matter is a good example. I don't think many people in the German movement contexts are aware of how much reproductive work is done for each other in the movement, among the activists themselves. Some of it is very professionalized. Reproductive work is certainly a very large part of what keeps a movement going. The interesting question would be whether we can also implement this for certain goods that one would otherwise obtain from the productive sector? That's where I currently am in my thinking about ways forward.

So a good way to demonstrate democratic planning would be to introduce it in certain segments of existing movements. With regard to coordination, I think distributed digital systems can certainly help with all the needs that can be fulfilled, irrespective of who provides the service. With these, you can feed in needs – basically the wish list – and then you probably need an assignment system to classify things according to the type of need, the geographical location and so on. A haircut will have to be provided close to your own location; for other services location is not a decisive factor. But it wouldn't have to work in a centralized way, it could work through cybernetic networks, meaning that no one would have control over everything just because they're sitting at a node. The whole system could work completely anonymously, with not only activists connecting to it, but basically everyone. Ideally, something like this would make people suddenly feel safer

and give them an experience of non-market, non-state supported care. After all, that's what a democratically planned economy would be, not a state as we currently know it, but a different state. And this is not a decentralized vision. It's a distributed one. Everything is connected, but not to one single lever of control.

Jan Groos:

In some cases of commoning you can find very similar structures to the ones you've just described. It reminds me of commons-based approaches such as the one proposed by Meretz and Sutterlüttich (in this volume). It also reminds me of the Global Commoning System, which I discussed with Markus Meindl on *Future Histories* (Meindl and Groos, 2022). That's a little bit along the lines of what you described. What I like very much is that this is also very much thought through in a way that has issues of transformation in mind. You don't allow yourself to leap unconditionally into the future, so to speak, but actually try to think it directly coming from the question of transformation, out of the process of construction within the individual movements, which I like very much.

I would be interested in your opinion on a particular problem that is closely intertwined with the issue of freedom. In the planning debate, the approaches differ quite a bit with respect to the question of freedom and voluntariness or, more precisely with respect to the question of whether work should be voluntary. Some form of activity, some form of work is or is not needed to ensure the reproduction of society, and the question naturally arises in the context of democratic planning as to how this is to be implemented. Do you rely on radical voluntariness or is there some other way of addressing that? I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on this. There is also the position that freedom and voluntariness are not the same thing.

Eva von Redecker:

I'm sure I'll have to think about it some more, but I am, and this is perhaps surprising in a certain way, more on the side of voluntariness. I'm a big fan of Heide Lutosch (in this volume), whom you've already had as a guest on *Future Histories* (Lutosch and Groos, 2022), and of her critique of the concept of the Friends of The Classless Society (2019). Heide says you must all be nuts, reproductive work is just so exhausting and gruelling and it must be distributed fairly. Everyone has to do their share, I don't want to have to wait until the last dude in the intentional community feels like doing the dishes. From this perspective, it's a privilege in the bad sense to think that from now on you only do what you feel like doing. I think this critique is really important and the text in which she elaborates this is great (Lutosch, in this volume). But a socialist economy nevertheless stands or falls with the slogan 'each according to their abilities, each according to their needs'. And the greatest promise is that fulfilling other peoples' needs within one's abilities does itself turn into a need. We would want to do necessary work. And if we wouldn't, then how would the control function? Models such as timebanks that establish equivalences like 'the more time you invest the more stuff you're allowed to take out', easily degenerate into a different or new kind of terror and also into a kind of pettiness that doesn't make utopia very desirable. I think these models are also pragmatically unrealistic, because the fantasy that you can force people always catches up with them. What I would always ask the advocates of timebank theories and also those for whom work simply has to be compulsory is how they intend to get people to work. You can't force people to do it well and a care job that is done unwillingly and involuntarily is almost worse than if it is not done at all. You can only force people to not be doing anything else during that

time, but to think that they would actually do things that they really don't want to do ends up becoming a control fantasy again. That is not realistic planning. Force provokes resistance. I keep having the experience in my collective household that the most urgent jobs are less likely to get done if you put them on a big scary to-do list. I don't think that means that you can just get rid of such ranking and prioritization systems and just wait to see who volunteers in each case. I find the approach of Meretz and Sutterlütti, for instance, interesting (in this volume; 2023), but to simply rely on the fact that some indicator of need, which they call the stigmergic signal, is already sufficient, that is also naive.

I think one way you could link that to my thinking about time is that the work that we commonly call reproductive work, but in which I would also include something like putting out future forest fires, are things that have an incredibly short time horizon. It simply has to be done now, and there is a necessity that arises from the nature of the activity and is to some extent related to it. One definition of reproductive work is 'production of life', 'provision of life's needs', and of course the screw factory that built the screw for this mic stand here is also part of the reproduction of life in the socialist economy. But in case of doubt, one can better endure a supply stop in this screw factory than a power cut in an intensive care unit, a crying child that nobody attends to, or a harvest going to rot. I have the feeling that we need a different way of thinking about the necessity of certain work. So, one of my suggestions would be to say that, to some extent this could be addressed through the immediacy with which the question of life or death arises in the performance of a task, or that this could even be quantified in some way. Based on this, we have to organize society in such a way that there is a great deal

of redundancy in the areas where such work arises, for instance in the children's ward and the fire brigade. In other words, a lot of people are working to ensure these needs are met, which is the opposite of how things are now. Firefighting is still ok here, but in the USA they already use prisoners for forced labour. At present, reproductive work in families is unfortunately organized in such a way that there is no safety net at all, which, to be clear, means that one person's time – or at the very best that of two – is totally committed to the needs of another for the rest of their life, or at least for the next 18 years. That someone with this experience of reproductive work in the form of motherhood then says 'it's absurd to say all work is voluntary', seems completely appropriate to me. I'd suggest that what follows for the planning debate is to look at interesting radical feminist proposals, such as Sophie Lewis's (2022), and to say 'well, then we have to organize families in such a way that every mother will have multiple surrogates, and kindergarten teachers, and so on'. We need to make people replaceable first and then see who really does their labour voluntarily. This is roughly the opposite of how we organize our society at the moment. Hospitals are extremely understaffed, although the most urgent work is being done there, and at the universities a lot of people are competing for a few positions and are doing things that could probably also be done tomorrow. And there will be tough democratic debates. Some areas of reproductive work – like cleaning before a visit of the inlaws – to me seem extremely negligible compared to all the labour we need in an ecologically transformed agricultural sector, for instance.

So, those would be some initial considerations. That means, above all, that a reorganization of work areas can have a positive effect on the urgency or necessity of certain work.

Then you only have to make sure that the required work is being done by any one out of 20 people, and that the same person is not always forced to step in. That is perhaps still not fully voluntary, although one can, of course, then also say that these positions are perhaps taken voluntarily and if no one takes them, then one must ask oneself what is going wrong to make this work so unappealing. Sometimes it is the shadow of past oppression. I definitely will need a few decades without any remainder of patriarchy before I can do housework in the presence of men who do anything less than a full half of it. So, some tasks maybe need to be rationed. And yet the better path always is to investigate how the job could be made more attractive, and made to mean something. Ultimately, I think such mechanisms are a good way to ensure that the work is done.

Jan Groos:

So, if I understand it correctly, this means that there is a core sector that is basically determined by urgency and that this core sector is simply multiply secured by people who volunteer to do it. Everything that lies outside of this sector of urgency is basically not so important that you can't simply see how it unfolds on its own, so to speak. Because one question for 'commonism' (Sutterlütti and Meretz, 2023) is how to create this congruence, so that for all the needs that are there, people can be found whose need it is to satisfy exactly the need of the others. But you're actually shifting that a bit in the direction of, let's look at the basics, so that everything runs well, and from there we can look further. That's how I understand you now.

Eva von Redecker:

I think there is an interesting overlap, because the things that are very urgent are often the ones that have a very unproblematic ecological impact. Another element that I would like to feed into the democratically planned economy of the future, not as the final

criterion, but as a basis for decision-making, is the regeneration time that a good has. That basically goes all the way to geological, ultimately biological material cycles of planet earth. I believe that we need an indicator that shows whether we are using things of which the geological production time is incredibly long, or whose retention time in the earth's ecosystems is incredibly long, for example plastic or carbon dioxide. In such cases, an extra alarm bell is needed so that, in the democratic planning process, the environmental council and the climate research council and other councils look at it and decide whether it can be done at all. Many people are so fixated on this worry about whether everyone will stop working, but there is also the worry that everyone will want to have an electric Porsche or something like that, so there would need to be a mechanism in place to disincentivize such a form of overconsumption, too. This goes as far as saying, no, this is not as important as the pacemaker getting a battery – the latter comes first. 60 per cent of the work that is done now is care work. This is not a side job that women do after work, but actually the majority of the work in the economy. That's why it's so important to first think about how we plan for it. At the same time, we need to avoid the opposite pitfall and forget the role that longer supply chains play in reproduction. Sometimes, especially when white, liberal feminists discuss the topic of reproductive work, it sounds as if reproductive work is only the work that we would also phenomenologically describe as care, that is emotional, affective, physical close-range activity. But that's not the case. Go ahead and try doing some care work without someone building beds and growing potatoes. If you think of an economy from the perspective of reproductive work, you

naturally also arrive at the necessity of all work, also classical productive work, that is, all the way to industrial supplies. The key is to arrange them according to their usefulness for life and not for profit.

Jan Groos:

Very nice, that's also a good conclusion. At the end, I always ask the question: if you think about the future, what makes you joyful?

Eva von Redecker:

For my new book, I thought a lot about swallows. This unique joy when they arrive. I experience that as a great freedom, to see that another species is alive and comes past, that somehow the reproduction of our lives can fit together. Barn swallows use human buildings. They wouldn't be better off without us. And I learned that they are not quite so much in danger of extinction. I found that so reassuring [*laughs*]. So there probably are still swallows and humans around in the future and I think together we can be able to pull off some kind of economy that is based on solidarity.

Note

- ¹ This conversation with Eva von Redecker is part of the 'Future Histories LIVE' format, in which selected episodes are recorded live – i.e. in front of an audience. This episode was recorded on January 9, 2023 as part of an event organized by the university group Rethinking Economics Kiel. Find the extended audio version of the conversation in German here: <https://www.futurehistories.today/episoden-blog/s02/e38-eva-von-redecker-zu-bleibefreiheit-und-demokratischer-planung/>

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