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Ecovillage endeavours: for a culture of sustainability.

From a New Age colony in northern Scotland to a neighborhood in the city of angels... from a thousand-member-strong network in Sri Lanka to the small village in Saxony-Anhalt which forms the basis of my dissertation: the ecovillage is a worldwide phenomenon. Ecovillages display all the effort, creativity and diversity of intentional communities which (c)aim to live sustainably. As yet as good as untouched by academia, I will examine this field from the discipline of cultural and social anthropology.

The first projects labeled as ecovillages entered the 'market' of possibilities in the early 1970s, in both the U.S. and West Germany simultaneously. The emerging ecovillage movement gained momentum in the 1990s, with the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) evolving into a key institution. Their vision was for their movement to become less and less a niche idea, eventually attaining critical mass and leading the course of events towards grassroots societies mostly made up of ecovillages.

But first things first. At the beginning, enormous efforts were needed in to set up ecovillage-projects and keep them running. Secondly, urban metropolitan regions in particular were considered unlikely to ever transform into small-scale settlements. Thirdly, new variations on the theme and new players entered the field, such as CoHousing-modules, urban ecovillages and Transition Towns. These were often regarded as more progressive and more easily attainable for mainstream society, which, as a fourth point, is displaying increasing interest in issues such as sustainability, Peak Oil etc. So, it seems that the time is ripe for ecovillages to re-evaluate their visions, missions, strategies and actions.

My research starts with an analysis of the experiences of the pioneering ecovillages and goes on to explore the processes of self-awareness and self-positioning of eco-villages, and finally their interactions with mainstream society. How do ecovillage projects try to 'sell' their approach to society? On what analytical levels may these endeavors best be understood? And finally, what about their historical and contemporary significance?

I concentrate on one specific locality, the German 'Ökodorf Sieben Linden', which is also a major actor in GEN, using its integration in the global network to approach the ecovillage in its wider geographical context. The analysis of sources and interviews form the basis for the historical investigation. For the contemporary part, the range of methods goes from workshops and group discussions to participatory observation during field visits. The research done so far narrows the ethnographic focus on three main areas of study: knowledge transfer, strategic cooperation and regional outreach.

With this dissertation project I especially hope to contribute to the discourse on sustainability by providing insights into a vital contemporary grassroots movement, further adding to our understanding by outlining its historic dimension. I will argue that in this field we are experiencing new versions of the old attempt to create a culture of sustainability. The local and global dimensions are crucial in order to pinpoint the originality of the current approaches, with the way they are embedded within a global network. Another important aspect is the conceptualization of ecovillages itself, for which I draw on spatial, organizational and socio-cultural perspectives – for a Scottish trailer park ecovillage as well as a hamlet of straw and clay in Saxony-Anhalt.