



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

Getting Our Feet Wet

A Conversation with Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng

BY PETER REED AND DAVID ROTHENBERG

PETER REED AND DAVID ROTHENBERG: You have equated complex systems with diverse systems. Do you feel that diversity is some sort of intrinsic good? Is there a limit to the diversity that we should try to encourage?

SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG: A limit to diversity? It is very difficult to know what that limit should be, because we are very much a part of the total diversity. I prefer the term “complexity,” because diversity is used within information theory to express calculable quantity, while my complexity concept is dialectical. It’s easier to put it negatively, saying that to us limited human beings it is very dangerous to destroy the complexity that has taken millions and millions of years

for nature to build up by very many small steps and an enormous amount of experimentation in different directions. But it is impossible for us not to break down this natural complexity, because we are too many people with too many monocultures and we have become dependent on a certain way of utilizing nature as outside manipulators, which has a certain economic and political imprint that is very difficult to change.

You also talk about how a person can be internally complex, and have a number of different sorts of personalities. Can conflicts between the value systems of these personalities arise? Since there is no center of the personality, how are these conflicts resolved?

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Well, they are not resolved, they are ameliorated by stages. I go into, I move, from one personality position to another one. Of course, when I talk about the different personalities in the human being I am not talking about finished entities. They are always on the move, not having velocity, but changing and shifting, qualitatively speaking. It's as if I have a discussion going within myself—I've experienced this many times.

So not only should we develop diversity in our personalities, but also develop ways of switching from one to another?

That's right, I'm not talking at all about split personalities, but about utilizing the various potentialities within the human being. Developing a personality means to become part of a large environment, which is a field of activity. My advice to environmentalists is then to become even more complex. It is needed in our situation, both to be closely acquainted with the green world and our own nature, and at the same time to have an urban personality that can fight back. The Indians in Brazil can't fight back, because they have no access to the channels of communication in our modern society. But we can.

In many of your works you emphasize time over space. Is there something that is intrinsically good about time, or is it that people have begun to emphasize space more than they should?

Yes, but I prefer not to use the words good and bad. I prefer to talk about what is happening to the human being, to human society—where is it moving? What has happened in Western civilization is that we have replaced our sense of time with locomotion, mechanical time, clock time, which is necessary in a large, complicated society, because power centers have coordinated so many people, finally objectifying them as little machines that start and stop according to a fixed plan.

On the other hand, TIME, as I talk about it, is related to Henri Bergson's duration: it is a qualitative, subjective concept that leads directly into the lives of human beings, not abstract, like clock time, measurable only by machines. Qualitative time is the way to define a human being: he or she *is* movement.



Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng at his farm.

PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY

Peter Reed died at the age of 24 in a climbing accident in the Jotunheimen Mountains in Norway. When he died, he was a PhD student in Norway, studying deep ecology. Among his many accomplishments, Peter co-edited the book *Wisdom in the Open Air: the Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, which was published posthumously in 1993.

Musician and philosopher David Rothenberg wrote *Why Birds Sing*, *Bug Music*, *Survival of the Beautiful* and many other books, published in at least eleven languages. His first books were the English translation of Naess's *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* and *Is It Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Naess*. He has 16 CDs out, including *One Dark Night I Left My Silent House* which came out on ECM, and most recently *Berlin Bülbul* and *Cool Spring*. He has performed or recorded with Pauline Oliveros, Peter Gabriel, Ray Phiri, Suzanne Vega, Scanner, Elliot Sharp, Markus Reuter, and the Karnataka College of Percussion. He also worked on the films *SONG FROM THE FOREST* and the upcoming *NIGHTINGALES IN BERLIN* is based on his next book. Rothenberg is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Music at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. For more see: www.davidrothenberg.net.

So if we have spatialized time, as you say, we have eliminated a very important way that human beings interact with the world and themselves. But you are saying that the direction modern society is taking is hindering the development of humanity. When Arne says that real deep ecology has to be concerned with nature's intrinsic value, what do you say?

Yes, I am more anthropocentric than Arne, and of course we have talked about it. He feels closer to animals that are far away from the human universe; it fascinates him very much, and one of my many personalities does feel the same way. But although it is important to have strong feelings about nature, we *have* to concentrate on the human society and the human being, otherwise everything we cherish will be destroyed. We have so little time.

Do you think your work is in the interests of people, or in the interests of nature?

Both. I don't like to differentiate very much. The way I define a human being is not limited at the skin. At this farm the cows and sheep are part of our personality. But I feel less for an ant, for example, because it's so difficult to communicate with an ant. It's not so difficult to communicate with a cow.

Naess has his platform of deep ecology, and he says that though we borrow from many traditions, at some level there is a common agreement—these principles of deep ecology. Do you agree? Do we borrow from different traditions and then bring them down to a synthesis of ecological thinking?

Yes. But I would say that we are doing it from the perspective of creeping into those traditions, trying to utilize the potentiality we find in ourselves to become more than one. So in a way it's not a synthesis, but rather some sort of multi-pointed vantage base.

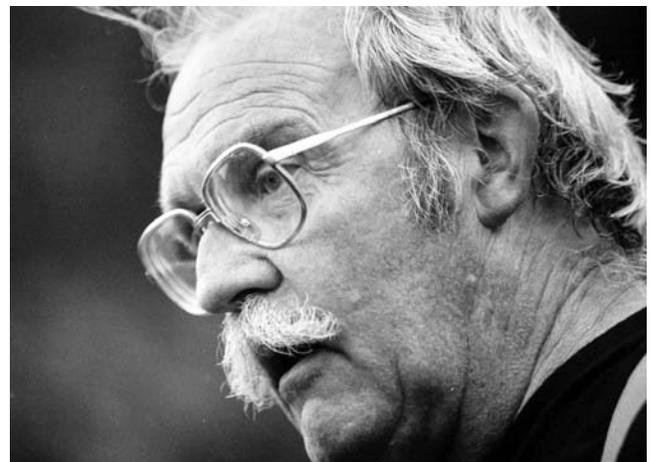
For example, when I was reading Buddhism, I was thinking in a sense as a dialectical materialist, so maybe

what I have tried to do with Buddha is something of the same nature as Marx did with Hegel—turning him upside down to a materialist position. You know, I have to use materialism here with great care, because it's not mechanistic materialism, it's something very soft and swampy. My kind of materialism has very much to do with continuous interchange between mind and matter. So it's not Marxist materialism. Many people feel this is an impossible combination. They don't understand how it's done.

To describe the way I'm looking and doing as synthesis is misleading. And it is difficult to put it into a framework of Western logic. I have been critical for many years of Arne's tendency to formalize systems. It's not wrong, but it's not my position, and I think that it does not open up possibilities enough. It limits our view, because it is a static way of describing the world. It doesn't help us to see, at least, how our subject matter is fleeting, and that there are no certain limits; we can get stuck with these systems and just keep repeating them over and over again.

Do you see your own work reflected in public policy today?

Oh yes, absolutely, but of course it's not only mine, but the efforts of a group of people that I've been with all the time. Some of the big clashes that came out of the



Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng. PHOTO: STIG OVE VOLL

non-violent actions were very fruitful, because the discussions that followed the actions lit up new corners in Norwegian society that had previously been dark and hidden. But one has to argue one's case in an appropriate manner—relevant, to the point, without attacking people personally, sticking to the subject, and without using devious means.

But were you not, in the beginning of the seventies, using quite a lot of devious means: an unheard of type of civil disobedience that served to focus much more attention on the environmental movement than before?

I didn't think of these as devious means. We were very specific and open about what we were doing, and the actions were very clear and well planned. Each of them was widely announced beforehand.

Some people think that the environmental issue has become very polarized, and that this has made environmental decision making much more difficult. What do you think about this development?

I think it's very good. I'm all for polarization. That's the only way we get deeper discussions. This brings up the role of conflict. In agreement with Gandhi, I say that the most important experience for gaining deeper understanding is to be in the middle of a conflict situation, where you are fighting for truth or life values—in the Gandhian sense, nonviolently. You won't change the world and you won't change yourself, either, by just sitting in a seminar room, sitting on the fence, or walking up and down the street in a disconnected demonstration. Our own inside universe is very limited, and in order to enlarge that we have to become more a part of the world, and the first way to do that is to engage in conflict, and the short history of Norwegian ecopolitics proves that I'm right. There is only one way to become courageous, and that is to be courageous. *Step into the river instead of just looking at it, and be grabbed by the current*, then something really begins

shaking you so that something happens to you—you are changed and changing the world at the same time. You can't just change yourself first and then change the world. That is very typically Western, you know, talking from the viewpoint that there are two such worlds: your own little world and the world at large, soul and the body, and so forth. It's just one great big process.

Do you have a concrete picture of the sort of society you want to achieve?

No, I don't have, and it would be irresponsible to think that one could have that. There's only a little set of principles that I have learned from comparing many different societies in different countries, and those are the principles of meaningful work, which would not produce any one definite sort of society, but a range of very different possibilities. But meaningful work is very basic.

If somebody in the environmental movement, anywhere, came and asked you, "Sigmund, what should we do? What future directions do you think environmentalism should take?" how would you answer?

First I would ask them about their own situations. Local situations are very different. Yet the unity of the opposition against *Industrial Growth Society* (IGS) helps us to understand each other. We should seek cooperation with people all over the world who are threatened by the same kind of developments. But watch out! Take care of your own local roots.

Are you optimistic about the efforts to transform us into an ecologically sensitive society?

Not terribly optimistic, but I just think it will make a difference, the more we are able to unite ourselves, to spread ideas like India's Chipko Andolan movement to hug the trees, the better chances we will have in the future. Our main chance has to do with the downfall of the competitive industrial society.

In this sense the so-called new age movement is

dangerous. Though it answers many people's need for some wave of optimism and offers something to believe in, it does so blindly, trying to blur the meaningful work found in the world's spiritual traditions with the rush of industrial and information technology, leading to a superficial synthesis that really has no legs to stand on.

What lessons does the Norwegian experience with environmentalism have for the United States?

Well, I can mainly talk from my own experience in meeting activists in Wisconsin. They were not city dwellers, they were farmers, and they had been awakened to eco-awareness through the threat of a gigantic highway that had been built through some of the finest farmland in the world.

These farmers went out and sat down in front of the bulldozers, and to their great shock they were immediately arrested and handcuffed, and suddenly they saw that underneath the smooth surface of their society there were some sharp claws. They thought that as soon as people got to know what was at stake here, they would realize the insanity of this highway construction. But this arrest was instead the first stage in their *own* awakening, and I think it is a good example of the dialectical development in individual human beings.

After this, they did something quite unprecedented, which shows they had become different persons. They took a lot of big milking cows on a truck and went to Madison, the capital of Wisconsin, and at night they put up a fence around the lawn outside the capitol building, and they tried to get the cows out onto this lawn. A policeman came up, and of course he had a gun, and he said, "What are you doing here?"

and a farmer said, "Well, we had some cows here, and they were hungry, and this spot looked so good." And the policeman said, "What, in the middle of the night in front of the capitol? The first cow that comes out I'll shoot," and at that moment not one but all the cows came storming out of the trailer and nearly ran the policeman down, and of course he couldn't start shooting all of them. They were able to keep the cows there for a month, and a lot of people became aware of the situation, and the construction of a second highway was actually stopped!

So the lesson is that ecopolitical activism of the Norwegian type can be used in America?

Yes, these farmers and I were able to understand each other very, very well. But my students at the university were very far removed from doing a thing like that. The farmers were willing to do it because they were pushed into it as it had to do directly with their local environment, economy, and daily work. So I brought one of the farmers up to lecture to my ecophilosophy class. And he made quite an impression. My students had some difficulty understanding him, but they would have to become farmers themselves to really understand.

In olden times, philosophers were generalists and were strongly engaged in their own society. All questions were relevant to their work, which was the mother discipline that laid the grounds for all else. Modern academic philosophy is not that at all. That is why I left it—none of my colleagues were interested in process philosophy, not one! I think they could do far better by engaging in the world around them, stepping into the river, rather than looking back into the past without ever getting their feet wet.