

Garry Nicholson

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‘Service, this is about knowing yourself, and then choosing how you want to live your life, and then deciding where you fit in with society. And if you decide you want to be in the centre of it, or if you decide that you want to be on the edge of it, this kind of knowing yourself makes you know where you’re going to be in that community.’

Lasse runs the school of self-sufficiency ‘Omavaraopisto’ in collaboration with the folk high school Kainuun Opisto in Northern-Karelia, Finland. Teaching: crop gardening, ecological building, handicrafts and more, the purpose of the school is to ‘provide a broad range of knowledge and guidance for people interested in living on their own terms and working with their hands. To learn and develop alternative models of living in harmony with the finite resources nature has to offer.’

I was particularly interested in having a conversation with Lasse because of his reputation for not only being someone who lives completely self-sufficiently, having done so successfully on between thirty and fifty euros per annum for many years, but also because of his reputation for being a radical social thinker. Having read his publication ‘*The Foundations of our Life*’ prior to our conversation I could recognise clear humanist¹ and transcendentalist anarchist² principles underpinning his personal philosophy and I was interested to know how these had influenced his approach to teaching. It was also apparent that his whole life so far has been a fiercely independent learning journey, very much in the spirit of *Bildung*.

If a fusion of horizons³ involves a contrast of environment then this was certainly it. Having lived a relatively conventional city life for the majority of my life here I was in conversation with a

¹ Humanism is rooted in the idea that people have an ethical responsibility to lead lives that are personally fulfilling while at the same time contributing to the greater good for all people.

² Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in the eastern United States. Transcendentalists believe that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—corrupt the purity of the individual.

³ The term ‘Fusion of Horizons’ was coined by the German philosopher Hans-George Gadamer (1900-2002) and describes the merging of perspectives which in hermeneutics is seen as an essential feature of the understanding of an unfamiliar culture.

man who has lived the majority of his in a log cabin deep in a Finnish forest. From the dark cabin walls to the home spun jumper, I was in no doubt that Lasse's is a different world to the busy suburban world just outside my door.

I was interested to know the catalyst for Lasse's journey into self-sufficiency, as what is now considered an extremely topical theme in the light of global warming was a much more radical lifestyle choice thirty years ago. He told me that during his childhood in Germany, as the son of Finnish immigrants, 'I was as a small child already quite far into electronics, and physics. And so that seemed to be the natural choice of my life.' This early fascination with science seems to have led Lasse to a point where he began to consider science in terms of moral ethics in his mid-teens:

I started to think, what would it mean, if I later, for example, worked as a researcher, something in a laboratory. At the time I was also interested in the history of physics, for example, those guys who created the basics of nuclear physics naively thinking that they were doing something good for mankind...then I was, yeah, that was actually the kind of physics I was also interested in, and I thought, okay, I delegate all the results I'm working on to other people, and they are doing something with it. I thought maybe I'm not really fond of this. ...in normal life, we give away the responsibility of what kind of food we are eating and almost everything ...and then I came to the result that actually the only responsible life is to take back all these delegated things.

With this thought Lasse originally intended 'to migrate back to Finland and occupy some forests and build up my project illegally... like, you know, Rousseau⁴ and Henry David Thoreau⁵. I had these thoughts about the law of nature that everybody has a place where he can stay and make his food and get shelter.' He was however able to take a more legal route with the help of his parents to purchase the land which he has now occupied for over thirty years.

Initially Lasse was unsure about the term *Bildung*, until I realised that the term, although familiar in Finland, is more commonly known as *Sivistys*. He explained to me that to him it meant

⁴ In the 1753/4: *Discourse on Inequality* Jean Jacques Rousseau set out his views on the fundamental nature of man, and on the origin of society, private property and conflict.

⁵ *Walden or, Life in the Woods*, is a series of 18 essays by the Henry David Thoreau, published in 1854. The book was a record of Thoreau's experiment in simple living on the northern shore of Walden Pond in eastern Massachusetts (1845–47). Walden is viewed not only as a Transcendentalist treatise on labour, leisure, self-reliance, and individualism but also as an influential piece of nature writing.

‘culture’ and ‘also about a good life, I mean, in a moral way...not selfish... you want to serve other people.’ I was interested that even though Lasse has largely withdrawn from society his definition was more to do with contributing to it. I asked him about this, and he expanded further:

I'm not really living in a community because I prefer to live abroad from the community. But when I see something, or I have a thing that I should tell, then I go into the community, but after that I withdraw again. Thirty years ago, I didn't know if I should be in the community? Or where should I be? What is my role? It lasted for many years until I got a feeling that my position in the community is not really at the centre of community. It's at the border.

I asked him what it meant to serve society and in his explanation he gave a fascinating interpretation of the *Bildung* process of self-enlightenment preceding public-enlightenment:

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For a man who has largely kept himself ‘at the border’ of society I wondered if his decision to collaborate with a folk school had been a problematic one and it was it clear that it had initially been a concern:

The thing is that with this collaboration I was expecting as an old anarchist, that collaboration with the mainstream might be difficult because I have kept myself very strongly out of dependencies. When we started this collaboration, I'm really wondering, how could we find creative, fantastic people from the mainstream to work with... but they give us freedom to arrange things... normally with many of these folk schools, they want to control the teaching somehow.

In many ways Lasse's school is a wisdom sharing exercise. A sharing of over thirty years of self-sufficiency wisdom. I was interested in how Lasse viewed the structuring of the knowledge and skills needed to live a self-sufficient existence and how this impacted on the learning process. His thoughts were in contrast to the linear way that much mainstream learning is structured:

The special thing in our schooling is that we are not teaching certain skills, so much, but more the context around the skills. When we are doing firewood, we are teaching how to make fire, how to save fire, how to arrange your work so that you don't use too much firewood. What you should

combine. what works, what should be pushed into winter and what work you should you have to do immediately... and so nothing is really separate... this is an associative thing... teaching somehow, like the whole. For this reason, I'm also jumping from things to other things all the time, so that they get know how one thing is embedded.

He explained further that:

Everything is connected but we are used to thinking and doing this an industrial context, which is separating the works from each other, and making them follow one after another... on the farm it is different because many works are connected to each other at the same time, sometimes parallel.

One would assume that having spent the majority of his life dedicated to living and promoting self-sufficiency this would be his dominant reason for starting teaching others. However his view on this was more to do with the development of 'self' than any kind of 'conversion:

It's mostly this- that they know about themselves, and they also know the things in which they are weak, and they can then somehow know where they are going next. This is more important than cloning self-sufficient people.

At points in our conversation we inevitably touched on the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic and the politics of self-sufficiency. With traditional folk school pedagogy in mind I asked Lasse if time was spent discussing life's big issues and questions during the course. His response was as I expected emphatic, 'Yes, we are going very far. Very far. I mean, I think we have nothing we are somehow not dealing with.' Likewise his response to my asking about how much writing is done during the six-month course would have resonated with the founders of some of the early folk schools, 'the one thing is that they have a lot of work, they are tired... what is happening every day is so intense.' He did acknowledge that learners did sometimes make notes for themselves.

It was clear that in Lasse's thinking there is a link between self-sufficiency, personal growth and being independent minded. I asked him to explain this further and he gave the following example which highlights the process as one of questioning our place within economic systems:

If you know, from where the food is coming, and you know, for example, how much work you have to put in into a kilo of something. And then you see what the prices in the supermarket are. Then you will realise that there's a contradiction you can't really solve. And then you start to think, why? How can it be? So, in our society this can't be done in an ethical, or in a responsible work way.

In many ways Lasse's time has come in terms of interest in the wisdom that he has about self-sufficiency. He is a good example of a radical thinker whose ideas have become increasingly accepted as wise by mainstream society. This is something that he is aware of, as he showed in his reflections on how many years he spent prior being 'at the border' of society:

I started to get into touch with people who are activists working on ecological issues and also political alternatives. For many years I didn't find any person who really wanted to make the jump into a system like this. I think it was about 10-15 years until the first people were brave enough or got brave enough. I really realized that in many social changes, there is this time of fifteen years before people can face a new thought until something happens.

If every teacher should be a philosopher then Lasse would certainly meet that requirement. For him self-knowledge or self-formation is not a process of preparation for contributing to organised society. Instead it is a process that helps the person decide how, and to what extent, they might wish to. His interpretation of self-sufficiency moves beyond food and shelter and also encompasses mental self-sufficiency and freedom of thought. This gives us a uniquely anarchist perspective on *Bildung* and self-sufficiency. Too often the assumption is that anarchist pedagogy is about free learning and the absence of control. Learning how to be self-sufficient in a Finnish forest is quite literally a matter of life and death and certain knowledge is essential. If an individual chose not to grow crops and instead only chop wood they would probably die of starvation! There is no doubt that Lasse teaches with structure and a clear intent, but as a process of liberation rather than indoctrination or control. His is a philosophy akin to that of the German philosopher Max Stirner⁶ who wrote 'Let the universal culture of schooling aim at an apprenticeship in freedom, and not submissiveness.' In effect what Lasse does is share his self-sufficiency knowledge is to give people the tools needed to be independent in thought and action. Within this interpretation of *Bildung* and folk school education there is no presumption that individuals will seek public enlightenment or democracy, merely that they will be independent minded enough to come to their own conclusions.

⁶ Johann Kaspar Schmidt (25 October 1806 – 26 June 1856), known professionally as Max Stirner, was a German post-Hegelian philosopher, dealing mainly with the Hegelian notion of social alienation and self-consciousness. Stirner is often seen as one of the forerunners of nihilism, existentialism, psychoanalytic theory, postmodernism and individualist anarchism.