

## 95. Letter from Europe by Tom Greco

Tuesday 27th November 2012

I recently completed a five week tour of Europe and the UK during which I gave a total of 15 presentations and workshops to various groups, in addition to consultations and discussions, and had occasion to meet up with many kindred spirits and colleagues working in the realm of societal transformation.

Now, back in Tucson, I'm tying up loose ends and gradually adjusting to a more leisurely pace. The last two weeks of the tour in England were the most physically demanding. I was back and forth between London, York, London, Ambleside, Lancaster, Cambridge, and back to London. The tour has resulted in some new friendships and collaborations, and opened up exciting new possibilities for our work. Here's an outline summary of my activities during the 5 week tour.

### Geneva

I left Tucson on October 1, arriving in Geneva on the 2nd where I was hosted by Tim Anderson of Community Forge (<http://communityforge.net/home>).

On October 3, I was one of three presenters on a panel session titled, *Solidarity Economy & Alternative Finance*, at the United Nations Palais des Nations. The session was moderated by Hamish Jenkins of the *UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)*. The other panelists were: (a) Peter Utting, *United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)* who spoke about general trends and issues relating to the solidarity economy, and (b) Frederic Lepeyre, who spoke about his research with the *ILO*. You can find a full report of the session at the *NGLS* website: <http://www-ngls.org/spip.php?article4134>.

On October 5 and 6, I conducted a workshop on moneyless exchange for a group of *Community Forge* associates. You can view my Geneva photo album at: <https://picasaweb.google.com/112258124863172998784/201210Geneva>.

### Crete

I was on the island of Crete from the 6th to 14th of October, during which time I participated in a two day workshop on *Community Exchange Systems and Alternative Currency Systems for Sustainable Communities*, led by Prof. Jem Bendell, as part of the *International Sustainability Summit* that was held at the *European Sustainability Academy* (Sharon Jackson, Director).

My presentation was titled, *The Emerging Butterfly Society: Making the shift to a steady-state economy and a world that works for all*.

The 2-day workshop included a sharing of experiences and ideas by leaders of local exchange groups from Crete and from Volos on the Greek mainland. The latter was represented by Giannis Grigoriou one of the co-founders of the Volos credit clearing exchange (called *TEM*) that has gotten considerable coverage in the international media, including the *New York Times*, *PRI*, and the *BBC*.

A concrete result of the workshop was an agreement to publish *The Drapanos Declaration* on exchange alternatives. Here is the text of the Declaration in English:

- Individuals, communities and environments are the true source of our wealth and well-being.
- Therefore we develop alternative means of exchange between individuals and organisations to foster more cooperative and equitable relations.
- Although we may focus on our own communities, we share this principle with other communities.
- Therefore we commit to work together in Greece and worldwide, to improve our practices, so that more communities connect to their own abundance.
- Our efforts are part of a greater movement to make economic activity more accountable, socially beneficial and environmentally sustainable.
- Our work must develop ever expanding circles of cooperation, exchange and learning.

We invite others who share these aims to join us in a growing movement and emerging profession on community exchange. We are asking others to join in endorsing this Declaration. You can do so by adding your name in a comment to the post at <http://jembendell.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/drapanosdeclaration/> (also available in Greek). You can view my photo album of Crete at: <https://picasaweb.google.com/112258124863172998784/201210Crete?authkey=Gv1sRgCMGYobzDmaroCQ>.

### Volos

Following Crete, Sergio Lub and I flew to Thesoloniki where we were met by Andreas Andreopoulos who had helped to organize our mainland tour. The following day, Andreas transported us to Volos where we met up again with Giannis who had arranged for us to conduct a workshop for a dozen or so of the core people in the *TEM* exchange. He also arranged for me to do a brief interview with a local TV channel, and for us to meet with the Mayor, who has been very supportive of this grassroots effort to cope with the financial austerity being imposed on Greece by the *IMF* and the *EU*.

My urgent message to the *TEM* organizers, as well as to the other groups that I addressed throughout my tour, was this. In order for a mutual credit clearing exchange to be scalable and successful over the long-run: (a) it must be anchored in the local business community, especially the small- and medium-sized enterprises that form the backbone of every local economy, and (b) the allocation of credit lines cannot be arbitrary, but must be based primarily on the level of sales by each account into the exchange.

The fundamental objective of mutual credit clearing is to create liquidity within the local economy, i.e. to provide a means of payment by which associated producers can buy and sell with one another without having to rely on the availability of scarce official money. That liquidity must logically be founded upon local productivity. It is therefore the most productive enterprises that should be allowed to carry negative balances in the system. Because they have demonstrated their earning power, they are the ones that can be trusted to spend before they earn. Except for small credit lines allocated to new members who bring goods or services ready for sale to the market, all others should be required to earn credits before they can spend.

After Sergio's departure to return to the US, I stayed on in Volos for two more days during which Giannis took me to meet with the Archbishop and to do an interview on the Diocesan radio channel. He also took me to visit the twice weekly *TEM* market to observe the variety of things being offered, and to talk with some of the participants.

### **Athens**

On October 18 I took a motor coach to Athens where I met up with some like minded colleagues and participated in a festival on the Solidarity Economy during which organizers of several exchanges came together to discuss how their local exchanges might be networked together. My thanks to Anthi Theiopoulou for providing hospitality during my Athens stay. You can view my photo album of Mainland Greece at:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/112258124863172998784/201210MainlandGreece?authkey=Gv1sRgCPLJ4KvFz9KTbw> .

### **UK**

On October 23 I flew to London, then journeyed onward by train to York to give a presentation at the *York LETS Conference*. I then traveled back to London on the 26th to do a colloquium at the *New Economics Foundation (NEF)* and two workshops for *LETSLink UK* on the 27th and 28th, finishing on the evening of the 28th with a presentation in Brixton sponsored by *NEF* and the *Brixton Pound*.

I next travelled to Ambleside in the heart of the Lake District to give a presentation, *Beyond Money, Banks, and the Left-Right Divide*, for executive MBA students at *Cumbria University*.

The following day (October 31), after joining the MBA group for a boat ride on Lake Windermere and spending a couple hours at the *Ruskin Museum* in Coniston, we proceeded to Lancaster where I gave a lecture to a mixed audience at the Lancaster campus of *Cumbria University*, then followed up the next day with a workshop that was supposed to last 3 hours but stretched on closer to five.

All in all, I was quite pleased with this tour. I think we accomplished some significant results, and I was encouraged to meet up with so many dedicated and able people along the way. You can view my photo album of England at:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/112258124863172998784/201210UK?authkey=Gv1sRgCKik98HWgZzhtwE> .

### **Musings on Travel in Britain**

The British rail system is extensive and rather good in terms of coverage, comfort, promptness, and convenience, but it is outrageously expensive. It seems that privatization in Britain has been taken to absurd extremes of exploitation. Going from London to the Lake District (Windermere), a journey of about 3 and a half hours, cost £92 plus a £1 booking fee, plus a £4 fee for using a credit card to pay - even though I had to do all this myself online (£97 amounts to about US\$156).

Furthermore, I had to pick up my ticket from an automat at the station, which required that I insert the credit card that I used to pay for the ticket...is it any wonder that we have an unemployment problem?...that is presumably for security purposes to track who bought the ticket and determine the identity of the traveler. That poses a major problem when the traveler and the purchaser of the ticket are not the same person. The best (and most necessary) things in life are no longer free.

Another gripe I have is that there are no free toilets or drinking fountains at the stations. If you wish to quaff your thirst, you are obliged to purchase overpriced bottled water from one of the many vendors who sell it at about the same price as soft drinks or juice. Then, in order to relieve oneself, s/he is obliged to pay 30 pence (fifty US cents) and negotiate a narrow turnstile to enter the lavatory (imagine doing that with a large bulky suitcase).

It should be obvious to everyone that the bare necessities of life should be freely available to everyone. In a society in which our common birthright has been carved up and appropriated by those who are best at gaming the system, indeed, at rigging the system to serve their narrow self-interests, that would seem to be the least that might be done. I propose that the Brits launch a popular campaign (and this is one where the graffiti artists can play a useful role) with the slogan: Free to Pee! Abolish Pay Toilets.

As a side note on that point I might also mention that *RyanAir*, a British low cost carrier, has begun charging passengers to use the lavatories aboard their planes. I happened to see a TV interview with the head man of *RyanAir* in which he expressed his desire to eliminate all but one of the lavatories on his planes so that he might install additional seats "to carry more passengers at low fares." Well, sir, maybe when your passengers begin to mess their pants on-board, you will realize that there can be too much of a good thing.

Perhaps this is all an experiment to determine just how much indignity and abuse people will put up with to save a few dollars, pounds, euros, or whatever. All of that, together with the shopping mania that becomes especially intense as the holiday season begins, is evidence of the extreme degree to which money has come to dominate our lives, with its scarcity forcing us to focus ever more of our energies on the material aspect of life.

I think too that perhaps the Brits have become a bit too compliant and tolerant overall. You can walk the streets of London and see some people covered from head to toe with only an open slit for the eyes to peer out. These people are presumably women, but who knows? There are security cameras everywhere but what good are they if you cannot see a person's face or any other identifying features? This seems to me to be a serious gap in the government's security net. In the US one cannot enter a bank or public building wearing even sun glasses or a hat.

### Travails of Travel

It's interesting how life often shows us things in sharp contrast. I've had occasion on this tour to live both high and low. After being comfortably hosted in people's homes or lodged in some pretty nice B&Bs, I had occasion to experience one of the rudest accommodations ever. At the very end of my tour, I arrived in London by train from Cambridge late on a Friday evening. I had expected to find an affordable bed at one of the many hostels around King's Cross station, only to find that they were all booked up. The friends I tried to contact all either had guests or were unreachable.

After dragging my heavy suitcase all over town I was desperate and willing to sacrifice a week's income for a night at the Travelodge, but even they were full. An online search turned up a vacancy at a hostel (No. 8) in an outlying area, which was twice the price of any of the others, but at that point I had no other option so I phoned (via Skype) to assure my place.

After an hour's journey on the Tube and on foot I arrived around 10 PM to find the place to be not only expensive, but far below par. Exhausted and demoralized I decided to grit my teeth and resign myself to my fate. I had to drag my heavy luggage up two narrow wooden staircases to reach my room which I had to share with three other people. Each step of the way revealed the place to be even a worse hovel than it first appeared. I flopped into my bunk and tried to sleep despite the lumpiness of the mattress and my doubts about the cleanliness of the sheet and coverlet.

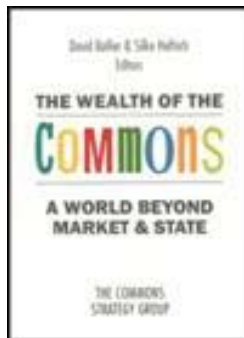
Waking in the morning not much refreshed, I was determined to not stay in that place a moment longer than necessary. I got online to explore further options and to work out a plan. My fortunes took a turn when I discovered one of my London friends online and available for a Skype chat, which ultimately resulted in a pleasant visit and comfortable couch to sleep on.

The moral of this story is: Never go to London on a weekend without having made prior arrangements for lodging.

A further tip for London visitors: Hotels are typically terribly expensive. The many *YHA* hostels in the area provide a high quality, safe, and low-cost option, if you don't mind dormitory rooms and shared toilets and showers. My favorite is the St. Pancras hostel which is very pleasant, clean, and conveniently located across from the St. Pancras Tube station and the Kings Cross train station. From there it's easy to reach any place you might care to go, including the airports and destinations throughout the UK. I've since learned that there are also a number of budget hotels in that neighborhood, but I cannot vouch for any of them. I find *Trip Advisor* (<http://www.tripadvisor.com/>) to be a good source of travel information.

### Recent Posts

I recently posted Richard Logie's TED talk about *Complementary Exchange Systems*. Richard has operated a successful commercial trade exchange for almost twenty years, so he knows what works and what doesn't. Exchange organizers at the grassroots can learn a great deal from Richard and others in the commercial trade exchange business so I strongly urge them to watch this.



Please pay particular attention to the method Richard uses to determine the credit lines to be provided to members' accounts, as well as the list of advantages that membership in a credit clearing exchange provides and the elements that need to be standardized in order for exchanges to be effectively networked together.

These are the issues that need to be adequately handled in order for moneyless exchange based on mutual credit clearing to become robust and to achieve significant scale.

Finally, if you've not yet gotten your copy of *The Wealth of the Commons*, you can order it from *Levellers Press*. Read more about it at <http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/commons-transformative-vision>. My chapter is titled, *Reclaiming the Credit Commons* (p. 230), which I have also posted on my website.