Alex Demirović

Alex Demirović is a philosopher who is dedicated to exploring questions of democracy, domination and the utopian idea of an emancipated society. He explains why technology should not be separated from democratic processes, how both affect each other and how they form our understanding of the resources we consume. As we're sitting at our kitchen tables in Berlin and Palma -- connected through the internet -- he shares his excitement about the opportunities that lie in decentralized power networks and self-governed forms of energy production.

Alex, in the discussion regarding the nuclear phase-out in Germany you were saying that the matter is not just taken care of by switching off the nuclear power plants. According to you we have to think about how we can control the production and distribution of energy in a democratic way.

With the discussions following the events in Fukushima it became clear that energy corporations in Germany are willing to get out of nuclear power when there is enough pressure and their profits are guaranteed. Though they can still continue building nuclear power plants in other countries. For these companies, it is particularly important to keep control over the energy networks. This means, as I understand it, that a decentralized energy supply like solar power, biomass, and power-heat coupling through local power plants is all made very difficult because these corporations insist on creating big energy production plants, such as wind parks in the North Sea or Desertec in the Sahara desert.

That means that big energy corporations continue to benefit?

Yes, by installing old and new networks from the North Sea to the south of Germany, they not only interfere with the landscapes and the everyday lives of many people, but they can also monopolize the supply. For the energy production in the Sahara desert, big areas need to be covered with solar collectors. This energy has to be either distributed via expensive networks in a centralized way or it has to be liquefied. Then you need huge ports and big ships in Algeria or Tunisia or wherever to transport these energies, and a lot of security precautions for the solar installations and the harbors.
That means that the energy, the choice of technology, the form of distribution are not socially neutral at all, but have direct consequences on the way we consume, how we produce and how we will deal with the energy.

How does the production of energy exactly relate to its consumption?

We have a range of forms of consumption where we have to ask ourselves "do we really need them in this way?" As an example of energy saving, the "stand-by function" on appliances quickly comes up. In Switzerland alone, the removal of stand-by functions on electric appliances could save one to two power plants. That is an enormous amount of consumption, which technically speaking only serves the minimal comfort that a device is ready to use for hours or even days. If so-called environmentally friendly cars with electric drive are to be produced, then they need a corresponding energy supply and an elaborate and ecologically problematic storage systems. And this is something that is not decided based on sustainable, collective and democratic aspects. It's energy corporations that decide. The way energy is regulated, how it's produced and used, whether it's water, coal, nuclear power or increasingly the use of large scale use of wind and solar power, that is not a matter of collective decision making.

What do you have in mind instead?

My favorite idea would be that we determine things once in a democratic way and then perhaps we don't have to decide on them anymore in the future. For instance, I was quite impressed by the example of the "Solar Network". This is a global network of connected projects where people invent things with great social phantasy, which allow them to save large amounts of energy through a variety of technical methods or to produce more energy than required. This happens by making decisions on a communal or regional level.

You mean decisions should be made on a local level about how energy is produced on site?

Technically, window shutters or single roof tiles can function as solar cells, and then the extra need for energy becomes rather small – if required at all. If you look at solar houses that are constructed in an intelligent way, with insulation and energy for water supply, then such houses produce five times more energy nowadays than what they consume. That means that these houses are mostly independent regarding the supply of power. However, this also means that the control over the energy supply is taken away from the big corporations.
These solar houses quite impressed me, as there are technically many things possible. The discussions right now for example about transporting electricity to Norway or Switzerland, pumping water high up the mountains to let it flow down and generate energy again – much of that can be done on small scale in communities or even individual houses without gigantic infrastructures and a manifestation of power.
I admit that these are all technical possibilities, however, they seem important to me as they take away power from those who use the production of energy as a basis for oligopoly and by doing so dictate a certain form of living and consuming.
It is crucial that together we can discuss and come to a consensus about introducing new technologies and how we can use them. It is about enabling things in a democratic way, giving new ideas a try, seeing what is feasible – and if it is, whether it can be put into general use. I think there are many things being developed in such projects that could become common use. However, this never happens as big corporations oppose such possibilities.

Thus, technology plus democracy?

Currently, we have technology that is not associated with democracy. Technology is never just technology; it is always a social relationship.
This is why we need a connection of both - technical development that is motivated and guided by democratic processes.