

# Brave new world

DR. J. DANIEL DAHM SUFFERS FROM A 'CHRONIC JESUS SYNDROME': THE GIFTED 38-YEAR-OLD NATURAL SCIENTIST AND EXTENSIVELY PUBLISHED AUTHOR IS ON A MISSION TO MAKE THIS WORLD A BETTER PLACE

**BY NINA LAMPARSKI** Dr. Dahm's resume reads like a science student's wet dream. A fellow of the Natural History Museum and former teacher at the Imperial College in London, he's also a member of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility, Utopia Stiftung and the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. Dahm currently works as a consultant for the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, a think tank engaged in sustainable development with worldwide operations. His close friends include German quantum physician Prof. Dr. Gerhard Scherhorn and the philosopher Prof. Dr. Rudolf Prinz zur Lippe. Dividing his time between Berlin and London, the researcher has extensively worked in and contributed to the fields of sustainability and development strategies, ecological economics, North-South relations and philosophy.

A fervent critic of the very profession he belongs to, Dr. Dahm claims that science is currently failing in its mission to provide explanations and solutions for the problems faced by the modern world. But he doesn't stop there. The outspoken academic is fed up with the way political leaders advocate a doomsday 'man eats man' ideology, which, he says, is purely aimed at keeping us paralysed and scared. His latest book, *Urbane Subsistenz: Die 2te Quelle des Wohlstandes (Urban Subsistence: The Second Source of Prosperity)*, co-written with Professor Gerhard Scherhorn, contradicts this negative view of human nature. The work demonstrates how civil societies, and not money, predominantly ensure the welfare and wellbeing of citizens.

Perhaps most importantly, Dr. Dahm is not just a

talker. In very practical terms, he proposes a radical overhaul of financial and social structures. His integrative cooperation model is designed to counter disastrous climate changes and create a sane and happy environment for future generations. EXBERLINER caught up with the determined thinker to discuss his theories, and become a whole lot more enlightened.

**Were you a little Albert Einstein as a kid?** Already as an eight-year-old I was fascinated by the dark universe and coloured dots surrounding me. I tried to grasp what part I was supposed to play in relation to this little blue planet called Earth. Of course at that point it had absolutely nothing to do with science but I understood that time and space were man-made constructs and didn't exist in reality. This also meant that there could be no such thing as a time line limiting human existence from birth to death. Life felt more like one big movement, to which I contributed my own motions. After this realisation I was no longer afraid of the idea of death. As an eight-year-old boy I remember telling myself, 'I've dealt with the whole life-death dilemma so there's no need to talk about it anymore.'

**Did your friends think you were weird?** In a sense I did have people who shared my vision, not on an intellectual level, but on an emotional one. We shared a longing for a different world and it was clear that we didn't want a world where East and West stood against each other. You could say that the 1980s were pretty dark. We were real kids of the No Future generation. Our grandparents had left us the

legacy of Social Nationalism and the Holocaust. The sexual liberation and freedom of the wild 1970s were suddenly no longer possible in the 1980s. The AIDS bullshit began. Many of my mates also started to take heavy drugs like acid and ended up in psychiatric wards. Travel agencies in the States apparently ran an ad campaign at the time, which said, 'Visit Europe while it still stands'. At the time most of us were punks, a little bit greenie, a little hippie. Back then these different movements weren't as separated as they are today. The atmosphere was a mix of depression and rock 'n' roll. You wanted to change the world but everything was going down the drain, we were headed straight for an atomic war and ecological collapse, especially after Chernobyl in 1986. Even 25 years ago we were aware of these things.

**So you felt emotionally connected, but not intellectually?** Where I differed from my surroundings is that my mind allowed me to intellectualise my beliefs and justify the way I felt through solid, valid, scientific arguments. It gave me an absolute and unshakeable conviction that my vision was right. When I say 'right' I don't mean rigid. But I simply haven't come across any arguments that have invalidated my point of view. I wanted to better the world and I knew I could do it. My conviction was a chronic Jesus syndrome. I couldn't walk on water but I knew I could get closer to the energy of the cosmos.

**Even Jesus had a mentor. Who was yours?** Well, at first I wanted to be someone like Danton or Robespierre, one of these revolutionaries, but I didn't feel like being beheaded at the age of 30. I didn't see the point of joining some fanatical, violent movement,



and I still don't. It wasn't until I went to a conference in the early 1990s and met a man called Robert Jung that I found an inspirator. The 80-something journalist was one of the co-founders of the peace movement and futurology. His life-long research dealt intensively with the power and courage of mankind, and its capacity to change the world.

**Can we change the world? Are we all creators?** This has been a central point of his and my philosophy: We are the creators of our own world and therefore have the capacity to change things for the better. I'm convinced that even the smallest smile changes the energy of the world. Every word, every look, every scratch adds an impulse to the world, and you can decide whether this impulse is a positive or negative one. Do I spit at other people, disrespect them, leave them alone in their despair, or do I turn towards them, listen, and argue with them because I take their opinion seriously? In Robert Jung I found living proof of someone who had spent his entire existence living according to this principle. Until that point I'd always thought that it was wishful thinking rather than an actual way of life. But Jung showed me, hey, you can actually grow old with this attitude.

**And science became your guiding light on the path to enlightenment?** In the last few years I have increasingly distanced myself from the scientific world even though I still remain a scientist. For me the questions that science and humans in general are asking about the big mysteries in life are the wrong ones because they are based on a mechanical view of the world. Western civilisations think of the world as a machine, a closed system governed by a linear logic of cause and effect. In science they call this determinism. In other words, a is followed by b, which is followed by c, and so on. In politics this logic leads people to reason, 'I will throw a bomb on Baghdad and after that I will have peace.'

Once you live inside a closed system you can only ask certain types of questions and not others. If you remain inside such structures, which for instance present wars as a necessity, you become rigid and unable to shift your perspectives. Those who believe in these systems cannot argue their validity on the basis of scientific bio-ecological evolution.

**'Money is like cancer, which feeds off a living organism until it dies.'**

**This 'man eats man' mentality seems to play an important part in global economics.** Of course. A majority of today's crisis phenomena - and that includes the ecological and climate crisis, the loss of species, pollution of oceans, wide-ranging destruction of natural habitats such as forests, as well as socio-cultural crisis - are a direct result of this ideology. If you consider that man is man's worst enemy, or that the evolution of humankind depends on the survival of the fittest or most powerful, then you obviously won't think about developing an economic strategy based on cooperation and empathy. The current world economy, which is centred around the notion of competition, rivalry and expansion of assets, is in fact a life-destroying economy.

**Could you explain that in more detail?** On the most basic level this translates into the problematic relationship between financial and natural resources. If you create an unlimited concept such as money, inside a physically limited space, and bind them together through an arbitrary value system, there will be issues. In this sense money is like cancer, which feeds off a living organism until it dies. Historically financial growth through credit offerings was initially a strategy to enable a spatial expansion of economic undertakings, and increase productivity. By taking up credit, a farmer was able to buy a second field, reap more products and make more money. But if you can't afford a second field you will try to use the one that you already have more intensively. This is what has happened on a global level. While our financial assets have grown we are no longer able to use them to buy more natural resources. By basing our economy on credits we have transferred actual costs into the future. And these costs are now

reappearing in the form of ecological consequences. At the same time we have transferred costs spatially by colonising developing countries and using their resources.

**And our world has become a global village ...** Because the world has become a much smaller place through increased transport links, the consequences of this spatial cost transfer are also reappearing a lot quicker. For example, the consequences of damages we do in a far away place like Nigeria are resurfacing and directly impacting our surroundings a lot quicker these days. It's simple. Ecological costs have a multiplying effect. Say you destroy a piece of land. This area is located within a highly complex biological, ecological and geological system, which in turn is governed by other highly complex systems such as the climate.





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**Talking of destruction ... what about developing nations' push towards industrialisation despite climate change?** We need to stop the exponential growth in industrialised countries whereas we are not allowed to interfere with the exponential growth of developing nations. For centuries we've made our fortune at the expense of these nations. Basically we've had our cake and eaten it.

Germany continues to annually produce 10 tons of CO2 per capita, but only two of these are actually climate neutral.

**Should we write our wills and bid farewell to this horrible world?** No, on the contrary. I'm not someone who tries to represent every situation as a crisis. I don't feel that we are living in a No Future world now, quite the opposite. I think it's incredibly powerful and encouraging that within the space of one generation we have been able to recognise the socio-cultural and economic changes that have taken place, to perceive the world as a whole, and to measure climate changes thanks to technological

advancements. In effect this has brought home the cyclical nature of actions and highlighted the power we have as people to affect our surroundings. Businesses now understand that actions they take here in Berlin can have an impact on the tide in Fiji.

**Do you have an instruction manual on how to save our planet?** First of all we need to stop thinking that we move inside a mechanical, closed system. If we understand that we are part of a complex, living structure then this means that the future also remains open and changeable. So each action I take is important, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem. Everything we do has a multiplying effect. Life itself could well have started from the single impulse of a tiny molecule inside a huge complex system, which had a multiplying effect and the result of this action is humanity. We're a chain of incredibly successful organisms which have been here against all odds for the last four billion years. We're living proof that we have the ability to adapt and change over and over again.

**But why should Joe Blogg care?** Because I find it difficult to believe that people will not care about the millions of lives that will be tragically affected by increasing climate change. I cannot accept that we as wealthy nations will just watch other humans die of hunger, disease and ecological catastrophes, even though we have the technologies and infrastructures to help those in need. It relates to your sense of self in this world. It's really important that people understand that living in relative harmony with the world and having an impact on a daily basis does not require much effort. All you need to do is just be a bit more inquisitive and a bit less cynical or bitter. Someone working in PR can, for example, question the ethics behind the products they are promoting. It will take generations before leaders will change their world tactics so the changes need to start on a grassroots level. If we become socially more responsible we'll stop relating to the world in a neurotic or psychotic manner and instead engage our lives and surroundings in a proactive, empathetic way.

**Are you implying we're all selfish scoundrels at the moment?** No, I think humans are by nature good. However the Bushes, Sharons and Putins of this world would like us to believe that people naturally dislike other people. Telling us that evil is everywhere and in everyone is like a form of international terrorism against humanity. It creates a collective panic where one person starts to scream, 'I'm scared,' and suddenly everyone is running around like headless chickens. The idea that life itself is life-threatening is completely absurd, because it denies the productive, creative and cooperative forces of life. It's extremely dangerous to advocate an ideology of human evil because it justifies the existence of wars, the military and violence.

**I often feel like I'm being watched. Am I paranoid?** No. Public spaces are being represented as unsafe places, or unprotected danger zones. In London alone you have more than four million surveillance cameras. But sources who work for the MI 5 and MI 6 units of the British secret service have told me that this does not objectively increase public safety. At the same time there's obviously an increased surveillance of free communication spaces like the Internet.

**Are you panicked, alarmed or alert?** I don't think there's reason to panic but I do believe there's reason to be worried, to be angry, and there's reason to start a peaceful revolution that will fundamentally shift our economic and social order in the direction of what I call integrative cooperation.

**Which leads us to your upcoming book *Urbane Subsistenz: Die 2te Quelle des Wohlstandes* ...** The book is the result of a research project, which I undertook with Gerhard Scherhorn in Berlin, Cologne and Stuttgart over the past few years. The central topic is urban subsistence or self sufficiency. The goal was to show to what great extent self-motivated work

## Urban subsistence

*Urbane Subsistenz: Die 2te Quelle des Wohlstandes (Urban Subsistence: the Second Source of Prosperity)* demonstrates how the welfare and future of our society depends primarily on voluntary work by citizens, not on a money-driven economy.

The book is the result of an intense collaboration project between Dr. J. Daniel Dahm and Professor Gerhard Scherhorn, who over the course of several years analysed the socio-economic and political infrastructure of Berlin, Stuttgart and Cologne as models. The scientific study, which focused on the importance of voluntary work within German, and by extension Western society, is the first of its kind in Europe. Twenty researchers interviewed and analysed thousands of non-state funded social institutions, from squats and women's houses, to civic societies, counselling services, cooperatives and voluntary networks. In Berlin, the project focused predominantly on Friedrichshain and Pankow.

The authors argue that the importance of cooperatives and networks is frequently underplayed in industrialised nations. They contend that social systems cannot survive if their only *raison d'être* is the production of material goods. Technological advancements need to be given a new ethical component.

In the light of the current climate crisis, the work attempts to demonstrate ways in which urban subsistence can be used effectively to help achieve sustainability of natural and social resources, counter climate changes and redress political imbalances.

*Urbane Subsistenz: Die 2te Quelle des Wohlstandes* will be published in spring by Oekom Muenchen Verlag.



for others has already contributed to, and ensured the welfare and well-being of Western societies. For example, civil help and support among citizens remains incredibly strong in Germany, despite there being less and less funding for welfare bodies. Based on estimates by the Statistisches Bundesamt, more than half of our labour force is based on unpaid, voluntary work. On a global scale the figures are even higher, according to the International Labour Organisation.

Our study has shown that the goal of human interaction in this world does not primarily reside in monetary growth but in cooperation and engagements aimed at helping each other to survive. Economics play but one part in this interaction process, albeit an important one. I'm not advocating the abolition of financial markets; however their foundations definitely need to be transformed.

**You're bringing bartering back?** No. But a market is by definition a collective and not a privately owned place. A well-functioning market should be capable of providing an exchange system for goods - of material or non-material nature - that people need to survive. The worrying thing is that these days, however, there are an increasing number of goods that can no longer be traded or exchanged via markets because they have no materialistic equivalent or are

not profit-bringing. A grandma who's poor and in need cannot trade herself on the stock market. She holds zero investment value and is excluded from real social benefits.

In other words, a lot of the things that people require to survive and live in dignity currently purely depend on our good will and empathy. Shipping condoms or medication to Africa will not make you rich. The same goes for establishing cooperatives, unions, networks and so on. You can't sell any of these things, but they are essential for the binding of our social fabric. In this sense the current economic markets utterly fail to cater for human needs because they don't grant access to the majority of people.

**How is urban subsistence reflected in Berlin?** You could say that the development of the creative industry in Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte and Friedrichshain, the development of the Tacheles Art House and Oranienburger Straße, and the creation of the Berlinale are all examples of self-motivated, unpaid work by citizens who decided to proactively stand up for their ideals. They've joined cooperatives and organisations to realise their dreams individually and socially.

Many of these socio-cultural developments have since managed to create a healthy link between

non-commercial and commercial aspects, unpaid and remunerated work.

These sustainability strategies reveal the great power of urban subsistence. People are capable of making their own decisions and it's important to decentralise and shift urban governance back to a more local level.

**Famous last words?** What really matters is to take heart and recognise that we belong to a key generation that's responsible for the cultural evolution of mankind over the next 1000 years. People should take notice of all the various cooperatives and support those structures around them, which are not being used to their full potential. We need to realise that we play an essential part in changing the course of the future, both as individuals and social members. Start campaigning for businesses to promote strategic consumerism. Become involved in arts projects, where the primary aim is not to make money but to engage and please others on a creative, emotional level. Raise your voice whenever you get a chance. Switch energy providers. Just don't stay silent.