

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

Edited by Andrzej Siciński and Monica Wemegah

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THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

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PREFACE

The present book constitutes the second volume coming out of the sub-project on Alternative Ways of Life of the United Nations University's Goals, Processes, and Indicators of Development project. Whereas the first book, *Poverty in Progress: Changing Ways of Life in Industrial Societies* by Ian Miles and John Irvine with Monica Wemegah, and Dag Poleszynski (Pergamon Press, 1982), focused on the ecological, social, and individual crises brought about by what is now commonly called "overdevelopment," touching only marginally upon the question of personal and political reactions against it, in this book thirteen authors from seven different countries discuss concrete actions and strategies of change, initiated in both Eastern and Western Europe over the past ten to fifteen years.

The idea of writing another book emerged at the third research meeting of the Alternative Ways of Life network participants in Grzegorzewice, near Warsaw, in May 1980, where ongoing national studies on alternative-ways-of-life movements were confronted and discussed. This book contains the gist of cross-national and cross-cultural research which is to continue for several years to come. Although not listed among the authors of this volume, many members of the Alternative Ways of Life sub-project have significantly contributed to both the theoretical and the empirical reflections contained in this study. We should like to express particular gratitude to Johan Galtung, former GPID project co-ordinator and participant in the Alternative Ways of Life network research, for his many valuable insights and comments on both the structure and the content of this book.

Monica Wemegah
Geneva
July 1981

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF LIFE – THEIR IMPRESSIVE PRESENT AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

**Andrzej Siciński and
Monica Wemegah**

This book is about social movements whose aim is to create and to spread in contemporary societies new ways of life that are based on values radically different from those prevailing at the present time. Such ways of life have been called “alternative ways of life” (AWLs) by those who adhere to them. Similarly, such social movements are called “alternative movements” by those who participate in them. The present book is about the participants or *actors*, as they are often called, of those movements, about their way of thinking or *ideologies* and about their actions or *strategies* – all this involving a great diversity of groups, problems and approaches. Thus, when we talk about *actors* of alternative movements, we have in mind small groups practising an alternative life-style in their own immediate environment, as well as pressure groups and even political parties fighting for alternativity in social life at large. When we look at the *ideologies* of these movements, we discover a wide spectrum of ideas that are crucial to them, ranging from the stress put on the enrichment of human potential to the importance given to environmental protection. When we discuss their *strategies*, we refer to problems dealt with in some cases at the personal level, in other cases at the national level, and sometimes even at the international level. What is more, in some cases we have in mind overt, “legal” activities, whereas at other times we think of hidden, underground, “illegal” actions. AWL movements are indeed, by their very nature, multi-form, multi-issue, multi-level, and multi-strategy movements.

Talking from a historical perspective, AWL movements are a quite new social phenomenon. In a great many societies, for centuries if not millennia, their existed practically no awareness of any possibility of living a way of life different from one’s own. For millennia and centuries, there have also been societies who, though aware of different life-styles led by certain people or groups, saw no practical possibilities of making life-style “experiments” themselves, of proposing and actually testing alternatives to the existing

patterns of their everyday life. Therefore, the present situation which allows for "alternativity" in people's everyday life is something exceptional, rather than usual, in human history. Why is this so? Mainly, we believe, because it takes a certain level (possibly differing with different societies) of basic human-needs satisfaction, of technological progress and a certain standard of living to make possible options and choices seem realistic. In other words, a certain level of material development seems necessary to allow for both the physical and psychological possibility of undertaking social experiments.

The social phenomenon that this book deals with started both in the First and Second Worlds (the latter referring to the East European countries) in the mid-1960s and exists, with all its ups and downs, to this day. It is true that these social movements have different origins in different countries, responding to different impulses, involving different groups focusing on different issues and actions, and having a different impact depending on the time and space within which they deploy their activities. However, both participants and observers stress the importance of some common features which make them appear as *one*, though highly differentiated, movement. To begin with, there is the fact that all AWL manifestations are reactions to the growing social anomy and spiritual alienation that can be observed throughout the developed world. While concentrating on different aspects of everyday life and using different methods for social change, all types of alternative movements in various countries strive to overcome personal and social alienation, to prevail over the division between the stage and the auditorium in social and political life, to do away with the gap between thinkers and doers, performers and spectators, patrons and clients, knowers and not-knowers. A second characteristic resides in the fact that AWL movements do not seek to modify the existing dominant way of life (DWL), but are bent on creating a new, truly alternative, way of life. In their language, to be "alternative" means much more than being merely "different," it suggests that "alternativity" should replace all that which is not alternative. Not changing the existing system, but establishing a new, competitive system (a way of life being always a system) is their declared goal. AWLs are conditioned by the DWL only in that they represent the negation, the radical rejection of existing, dominant ways of life. This is not to deny the interconnections between AWL and DWL, which we consider to be of great importance, as it is perfectly illustrated in the case of Poland, which recently has become a kind of social laboratory. Here, sudden and drastic changes in DWL – for instance as regards political life and living standards – have resulted in significant changes in AWL. Unfortunately, as this process is just getting under way, it has only been touched upon in the Polish papers of this volume.

A few words should be said, however, about the above-mentioned differences between alternative movements. Although they can most

probably be traced to various causes, the following three differentiating factors seem to be crucial. First to be mentioned are the differences in the *economic-technological* development of societies, as reflected for instance in their standards of living. Thus, in rich Western European countries their so-called “overdevelopment” and “overconsumption” are the main objects of discontent and protest, whereas this problem has not been felt with the same acuity within Eastern Europe. The second factor to be remarked upon is the political system within which AWL movements evolve. Thus, people in Eastern Europe (in the present book, Polish groups that are, to some extent, pioneers in that part of Europe and, for this reason, have been presented in a rather extensive way) seem to put much more stress on “imponderabilia” than their Western European counterparts, the Polish alternation movements dealing more often than in the West with such problems as freedom of expression, liberty to participate actively and effectively in social and political life, social responsibility, personality enrichment, or the role of ethical and aesthetic values in society. Finally, as a third factor we wish to mention some basic cultural differences, which have their roots in the past. Surprisingly, they seem to play perhaps an even greater role in the case of AWL than in the case of DWL, considering that the latter have undergone a process of uniformization, so characteristic of contemporary “mass societies.” On the other hand, among the alternative movements and their proposals we find many differences which may be attributed to different religious traditions (e.g. Catholic versus Protestant) or different social backgrounds (e.g. town/bourgeois versus peasant/intelligentsia) prevailing in a given society. It should be noted, however, that this last factor is nothing more than a hypothesis here, the materials presented in this volume providing us with hints rather than a firm basis for evaluation.

As mentioned before, the AWL movement was born in the mid-1960s. It had its peak in the mid-1970s when it was particularly active and visible whilst at the beginning of the 1980s it seems to be on the decline.¹

Why should this be so? Why should this interesting trend, so promising and attractive to many for almost twenty years, come to an end? In what follows, we should like to advance a few, though purely hypothetical reasons. In our view, one reason can be seen in the fact that AWL movements have been a spontaneous reaction against the dominant way of life, which, whilst

1. Different kinds of “periodization” of the movement have been proposed. Some authors hold that its development is marked by three phases, AWL movements starting out as “subcultures” located at the margin of the society or underground, then growing into “countercultures” living in isolation from the dominating culture, and finally developing into “alternative culture” (alternative movements) proposed and seen as a new model of culture which should replace the dominating cultural model.

manifesting itself in manifold ways, was nourished to a large extent by negative feelings and critical attitudes towards the existing society rather than by positive ideas of how to change it. As someone said, AWL appears as a rainbow, fascinating and impressive by the richness of its colours, yet likely to be a fleeting, transient phenomenon. Secondly, AWL movements have never had – and still do not have – a stable social basis. They are composed of sensitive and critical people from many classes and social strata, without however any solid backing of any segment of their societies. Last but not least, the fragility of AWL movements stems from their incapability – or unwillingness – to be firmly anchored in the economic structure of their society, a few exceptions notwithstanding. One could add as a fourth hypothetical explanation the fact that members of alternative movements tend to be rather young (people in their twenties or thirties), who upon becoming older seem to become either disillusioned by the sluggishness or even absence of social change, or simply tired and bored with their former ideals and corresponding activities.

So much for our speculations. Let it be clear that we want by no means to diminish the importance of alternative movements. Assessing their role conclusively or predicting their future convincingly, however, appears impossible to us. What can be said at this point in time, we think, is that any tentative evaluation both in a past and future perspective would have to take into account the direct as well as the indirect effects of AWLs, that is the role they play for their active participants and adherents as well as the influence they exert as possible models and examples within society in general.

In the meantime, we believe that this volume throws light on some important human problems at various levels and in different areas of societal life. Most obviously perhaps, this book illuminates the on-going social, economic and political processes that are characteristic of contemporary Europe. Moreover, it highlights the question of a changing “ethos” in our different societies. Finally, it calls attention to some more fundamental problems which one of the editors called questions of *Homo eligens* (the human being making choices), that is, of options and our making use of them, of problems of our free will, on the one hand, and external and internal limitations to our free choices, on the other. It is hardly necessary to recall the rather obvious fact that AWLs exist not only in European societies and not only in the First and Second Worlds. However, their character and role in the Third World would need a separate analysis.

This volume is composed of three parts. The first part presents some general reflections on the possible meanings of the expression “alternative ways of life.” While A. Siciński gives a general overview of various interpretations of the AWL concept and of theoretical and empirical typologies of AWL

presented by different authors, J. Strzelecki embarks upon an inquiry into the possible meanings of "alternative development" and "alternative life-style" in Eastern Europe, in this case Poland. Arguing from the point of view of Western European societies, P. d'Iribarne draws attention to the importance of radical "change of heart" at the personal level, the necessity of action at other levels notwithstanding. In the last chapter of the first part. M. Wemegah brings out some of the traits of alternative actions and strategies that make them appear as truly "alternative" when compared with the methods of social change commonly used by the dominant system.

The second part of the book contains rather detailed descriptions of AWL movements in five European countries where AWLs have been particularly active and hence capable of giving impetus and inspiration to similar movements in other countries and, at the same time, where systematic studies of AWL have been undertaken. O. Soininvaara reports on the growing importance of direct-action movements and alternative organizations acting as pressure groups at the political level, as well as on the socially relevant role played by small, localized AWL experiments as pointers to the possibilities of a more rewarding life-style in Finland. Within the vast pool of alternative movements, J. Huber has chosen to focus on their experimental wing, telling us about the ins and outs of self-help groups in the Federal Republic of Germany. Cruelly aware of the difficulties AWL movements face both at the individual and societal level, D. Poleszynski spells out personal and structural obstacles to AWL as well as some possibilities of overcoming them – Norway serving as an example for other industrial countries in need of profound societal change. A. Jawlowska provides us with information on the concrete manifestations of AWL in Poland, highlighting some characteristics that distinguish the Polish alternative movements from their Western counterparts. Reporting on Switzerland, W. Mäder insists on the particularities of the Swiss alternative movement, yet showing its growing relevance for the European alternative movements in general. By and large, we believe that these national cases illustrate well the main types as well the main trends of AWL movements. The reader may find some information on such movements in other European countries in other parts of this volume as well as in the first book produced by the GPID/AWL network¹ containing additional studies of AWLs in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Japan.

Part III, finally, deals with several important ideas motivating AWL movements in different places. While in the first book produced by the GPID/AWL network,² accent was put on economic and political problems

1. *The Poverty of Progress: Changing Ways of Life in Industrial Societies*, edited by I. Miles and J. Irvine, with Monica Wemegah and Dag Poleszynski (Pergamon, Oxford, 1982).

2. Ibid.

calling for, and leading to alternative solutions, here we discuss some rather specific questions of AWLs pertaining to their political, technological, socio-cultural and spiritual quest for a more humane society. Thus, the reader will find studies on the "Green Wave" movement representing a major political trend of AWL in the industrial world, on psychotherapy as one promising approach to AWL at the individual level, on the search for AWL through theatre and also, on the role of technology and science in stimulating AWL. As a final problem in this part of the volume, we discuss questions of ties, connections and alternative networks at different levels and in various areas of societal life.

At the end we should like to say a few words about the authors of the book and about the language they use. Concerning the authors, it should be stressed that not only do they originate from seven different countries, but beside that, represent also different approaches (empirical, normative, theoretical), different conceptual schemes, different political sympathies, and different types of connection to, or involvement in, AWL movements – all these being differences which the editors did not feel necessary to suppress.

A few explanations concerning the language used in this book must also be added. The truth is that the language of AWL movements is, to some extent, alternative itself. Many groups and movements have developed expressions and connotations of their own which the authors of this book felt obliged to reproduce as such. In order fully to understand their meaning, several of these AWL terms probably need additional comments. This is the case, for instance, for the distinction between "ways" and "styles" of life introduced by some authors. The respective usage of the terms "way" or "style" of life is connected, mainly, with two traditions in contemporary social science: "way" predominantly with the Marxist tradition, "style" with the Humanistic (more precisely the "*Verstehende*") tradition in sociology. It remains that by and large, both terms refer to practically the same thing. Another, rather confusing habit amongst both AWL theoreticians and practitioners is to use colours as labels for different types of alternative movements. Sometimes, these colours – such as green, red, blue – designate political affinities: red = socialist; blue = liberal; green = a "third way," as distinct from red and blue, etc. At other times, colours designate sympathy with a particular issue: e.g. green = pro-ecologists, red = pro-minority rights, blue = pronuclear energy, etc. "Leftist," "rightist" and "alternative" alliances are designated by simply joining two colours together: the red-greens, the green-blues, the green-greens, etc. When distinct colours do not suffice (in the case of alliances being a hodge-podge of anarchist, rightist and leftist movements), sometimes the expression "coloured" is used to underline the ideological and political novelty of AWL formations. Another example of the burgeoning alternative language is provided by various efforts to designate the level of

action of AWL movements. In order to emphasize their opposition to the "political," "structural," "systemic," "institutional" levels, etc., the level of AWL actions is alternatively termed "grassroot level," "the basis," "the scene," the "counter," "second" or "parallel" society.

The term "alternative ways of life" itself is subject to different interpretations, depending on the participants or observers of a certain movement. For some, AWL designates the totality of alternative movements, no matter at what level they carry out their actions (personal or institutional), no matter the field of their concern (social, political, economic, spiritual, etc.). For other, AWL refers exclusively to the practical movements actually living and experimenting with alternative life-styles. Occasionally the reverse holds true, the expression "AWL" being used to describe alternative actions at the political level, as opposed to alternative experiments with living on the individual plane. With the resurgence in the early 1980s of apolitical and anarchical violent movements ("no future people" in Germany, "movement of the unsatisfied" in Switzerland), AWL has also come to be identified, perhaps more clearly than before, with movements striving for a non-violent, peaceful change of society.

A final example we would like to cite here refers to the notion "community". The word "community" appears as an alternative term for co-operatives (people working, sometimes living together), collectives (people living, sometimes also working together) or communes (people living and working together). Furthermore, "alternative communities" is also a term used for groups who share certain ideas (political, ethical, cultural, etc.) without their necessarily living and/or working together. The proper meaning of alternative language can indeed only be detected within the particular context used. Here again, the editors did not feel it necessary to interfere with the authors' vocabulary.

In closing, we should like to express our hope that the present book will not only render a vivid and politically highly relevant picture of contemporary social trends in Eastern and Western Europe, but will also contribute towards the urgently needed change in our politically, socially and militarily highly fragile societies.

I. WHAT IS AWL?