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**Aki and Friends**

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## Aki and Friends

Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan

Jerusalem and Montreal, April 2013,

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In the spirit of Akiva (Aki) Orr, 1931–2013

Aki, a man enamoured with life and enchanted by animals – including humans of different varieties – pays a visit to his friend, the veterinarian. The vet tells him of two seniors who suffer from depression, and Aki is quick to raise their spirits and warm up their aching bodies. He hangs the boa constrictor on his neck and places the hairy tarantula on his head. There is

no need to worry, he assures us. After all, why would two elderly creatures hurt an empathetic being so eager to help them?

This view was typical of Aki. That is how he viewed the world, its history and conflicts – as well as the solutions for those conflicts.

‘Just think about it logically’, he says. ‘Why would a Palestinian suddenly turn into a “terrorist”? What reason does he have to oppose “peace”? Why should he be eager to fight the “only democracy in the Middle East”? Is it his culture, religion or race? Is it “in his nature”, as the Zionist propaganda machine reiterates?’

Of course not, he answers.

For more than a century, the Palestinians have confronted a Zionist movement whose colonial policies have gradually deprived them of their life, land and autonomy. As often happens with occupiers, the Israelis have preferred to blame their victim. Their fancy academic theories, spiced up with ideologies of culture, religion and race, prove, at least to themselves, that there can be no ‘political solution’. The ‘Arabs’, they say, cannot be trusted. Like the boa constrictor and tarantula, it is ‘their nature’ to bite and strangle.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, these explanations have no traction. Most sensible observers around the world have come to accept Aki’s logic and reject the official Israeli line as self-serving, if not ludicrous. But that wasn’t always the case.

Half a century ago, when Aki and his friends started their hazardous journey to explore the underlying logic of the conflict, they were considered illogical, if not weird, and branded as ‘traitors’ (although it was never clear exactly what or who they had ‘betrayed’).

### **The Other Logic**

One day, Aki had his new car hijacked by two Palestinian teenagers. He was backing up into his parking spot, when one of the teens pretended to have been hurt by the automobile’s back bumper. Aki hurried out to assist the ‘injured’ boy – and as he stepped out of the car, the two thieves jumped into the vehicle, racing it toward the ‘slaughter houses’ of the nearby Palestinian town of Taibe to be dismembered and sold for parts.

Aki didn’t seem particularly worried about his stolen car (which, incidentally, he had just bought and hadn’t yet insured). His real concern was the two juvenile robbers. The Zionist occupation, he said, had left them out of the loop. It limited their land and restricted their access to water. It undermined their education. It barred them from the formal labour market and made it difficult for them to secure legal employment. They existed on the slippery margins of the food chain. What options, other than high-risk petty theft, did they have?

For Aki, the world seemed straightforward. Nature and society, he thought, are logically ordered, usually in a fairly simple way. The rulers constantly try to conceal this simplicity. By manipulating knowledge, controlling the prevailing ideologies and dominating mass communications, they trick human consciousness and distort reality. But they can do so only

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<sup>1</sup> Akiva Orr, *Alternative to a Psychotic State*, Hebrew (2010, n.p.).

for a while. Over the longer haul, the human quest for clarity, consistency and meaning is much stronger. Manipulation collapses and enlightenment prevails.

Aki was firmly wedded to this view. Contemporary postists dismiss this view as antiquated, but Aki wouldn't even dream of changing it. He was an 'enlightened modernist': rationalist, humane, without a shred of cynicism or a trace of hypocrisy. In this sense, his approach resembled Leibnitz's – although one could also see it as a variation on *Candide*.

As an enlightened rationalist, he was keenly interested in the history of ideas, both cosmological and political. One of his preoccupations was the Russian Revolution: why did it fail? He delved into Communist Party minutes from the 1920s, along with other discussions and debates, hoping to find in them clues to the riddle.<sup>2</sup>

The conventional explanations didn't satisfy him. According to one prevailing view, the revolution is best seen as a glorified gang war. The Stalin gang happened to be more focused and ruthless than its opponents, and it was this practical superiority – and not any ideological advantage – that helped it win the spoils and mislead Western intellectuals for years to come.

Aki considered such views simplistic and partial. He didn't fancy one-sided accounts. These may be appropriate for TV series or Hollywood movies whose individual heroes are never allowed political goals other than wealth and power. But in history, said Aki, especially over the longer haul, it is the ideas that matter. When you examine history logically, you see a never-ending clash between the forces of reason and the forces of chaos. Even what we normally think of as 'conflicts of interest' and 'struggles for power' eventually manifest themselves as opposing theories, ideologies and doctrines.

Aki's analysis of the Cultural Revolution in China was no different. In his eyes, it was not a gang war between Mao and the established oligarchies, but an ideological struggle over the future of Chinese socialism. And the same was true for U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century. For Aki, this policy was much more than a simple reflection of capital accumulation and the shifting strategies of domestic and multinational corporations.

A few years ago, we noticed that he had started reading books on American politics in the 1950s. In the beginning, we couldn't figure out this new obsession. He devoured scores of strange manuscripts, all packed with archaic details. And then it dawned on us: he wanted to convince himself that the Stalinist version of 'historical materialism', a doctrine he absorbed in the 1950s as a member of MAKI (the Israeli Communist Party), was in fact shallow and flawed. He tried to endow American political culture with a measure of autonomy, to show that it was not completely subservient to 'economic interests' and the 'dictates of capital'. The political functionaries, military officials, ideologues and managers who conducted the Cold War, he said, were not economic automatons. They were driven by prejudice, influenced by ideologies and hamstrung by intellectual blindness. More often than not, their political activity had little or nothing to do with the so-called 'objective-material' reality of production and accumulation.

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<sup>2</sup> Akiva Orr, *Revolution, the D.I.Y Version (20th Century World Politics – and Their Consequences)*, (n.d., n.p), Chs. 7-8.

The same logic was applied to the emergence of the Greek polis, a socio-political order that emerged together with and fused philosophy, mathematics and democracy.<sup>3</sup> Aki didn't like the conventional explanations of this fusion. For him, the polis was something else. It was radically different from any of the monarchies, oligarchies, dictatorship and tyrannies that dominated the ancient East. And that radical difference could not easily be accounted for by the so-called 'objective circumstances'. Academic sociologists and historians often point to Greece's mountainous terrain, its geopolitical setting and special technological conditions as factors that presumably helped it escape the oppression, violence and religious intolerance of so-called oriental despotism.

Aki rejected this view. In his opinion, the Greek polis was like the square root of two: something that emerges, suddenly and without warning, to defy and crack the all-encompassing logic around it.<sup>4</sup> There was no 'external determinism' here. Taken together, the evolution of logical dialogue and collective decision-making, and the discussions and debates on the good life and the encompassing participation, enabled democratic forms of thinking. They gave rise to pure mathematics, logic, philosophy, history, theatre, academia and humane public education. And these democratic forms of thinking in turn nourished, sustained and gave meaning to a self-conscious social order – the Greek polis.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Hidden Factor**

These were not mere metaphysical protestations, but engagements with a practical problem. Often it seemed to us that Aki was trying to develop an alternative conception of history, a theory that would be simple, logical and – most importantly – useful. This was the purpose of Marxism-Leninism, he said. Its goal was not merely to decipher exploitation and alienation, but to provide a way out, to help us *plan* the good life. If a political theory offers no solutions, he asked, why have it in the first place?

This is also how he saw the 1962 foundation of MATZPEN (The Socialist Organization in Israel): the purpose of the organization was not protestation, but revolution. In the 1960s, MATZPEN's radical politics were a complete novelty in the otherwise tightly controlled Israeli 'consensus'. Most treated the organization as an oddity, but for its members MATZPEN was a movement with a solution to a problem: the problem was the intensifying Arab-Israeli conflict, and the solution was socialism in Israel and the region.

But in order to bring about this solution, Aki and his friends told themselves and others, we must first explore, fearlessly and without inhibition, the root causes of our reality. We need to study the historical underpinnings of Zionism and imperialism in the region, to rethink the official story, to search for what the dominant ideology seeks to hide.

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<sup>3</sup> Aki's views on this subject were inspired by his mentor and friend Cornelius Castoriadis, a former Trotskyite, philosopher, political economist and psychoanalyst who lived in Paris.

<sup>4</sup> On the creative role of discontinuities and leaps in cosmology and society, see Akiva Orr, *From Protest to Revolution*, Hebrew, Second Edition (n.p., 2004.), pp. 27-29; and *Enlightening Disillusionment* (n.p., 2011), pp. 49-51.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Original Philosophy and the True Democracy*, Hebrew (n.p., n.d). This book offers translations from and commentary on the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis by Aki and friends.

And sure enough, they found it. Their inquiry led to the introduction of a totally new factor into the political equation: the *Palestinians*.

Until then, the Palestinians were a non-entity. Having been marginalized and concealed by the official Zionist historiography, they were entirely absent from the Israeli consensus. MATZPEN was the first to make them part of the equation. And the initial step in that direction was made in *Peace, Peace and No Peace*, a book that Aki co-authored with Moshé Machover in 1961.<sup>6</sup>

For Aki, the discovery of the Palestinians was a logical solution to a political puzzle: Why had Israel assisted the declining powers of France and Britain in their 1956 attack on the Suez Canal? The difficulty was that, only a decade earlier, Britain was still being accused by the Israeli government of fomenting conflicts in the region and was considered, even by leading Zionist officials, as the country's archenemy. So why had the tables suddenly turned to make Israel Britain's ally?

Originally Machover and I thought that Zionism's foreign policy stemmed from its support for the capitalist system. . . . As Communists, we thought that it was Zionism's opposition to socialism and its support for capitalism and colonialism that placed it on the path of conflict with the peoples of the countries colonized by the colonial powers. That explained Israel's participation [in the 1956 Suez War], and Israel's support for the United States in the Korean War (1950-1953), and Israeli support for French rule in Algeria and Vietnam, and many other Israeli policies. . . . (*Enlightening Disillusionment*: 41)

But the puzzle didn't fit. No matter how they rearranged it, there were always historical bits that didn't sit well with the theory. Finally, they realized what nobody had previously noticed: there was a piece missing.

. . . Palestine was populated by Arabs who wanted to establish their own state there (from 1936 to 1939 they rebelled against British rule). The Zionist aim conflicted with the Palestinian one. That conflict dictated Israel's foreign policy [which sided with that of the colonial powers, including Britain]. *It was not the Zionist foreign policy that dictated the Zionist settlement and military policy* (as the Communist Party claimed); *it was the other way round: Zionist settlement and military policy dictated Zionist foreign policy*. [The expropriation of] the Palestinians (from 1900) and building of Jewish settlements on their land caused Zionism to oppose Palestinian supporters (mostly anti-colonialists) [such as Egypt] and to support their colonialist rulers [like Britain and France].

In 2005 that seems self-evident, but in 1962 all Israelis responded with wonderment '*Palestinians*'? '*Who are they*'?

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<sup>6</sup> The second Hebrew edition was issued in 1999; the English version of the second edition, translated by Mark Marshall, appeared in 2009.



Until the 'Intifada of the Stones' (1987-1993) no Israeli politician, academic, orientalist, political analyst or journalist saw the Palestinians as a *political* factor. At the most they were seen as a social factor – miserable refugees who needed to be housed and fed. . . . [In 1962] It looked like the 'absurd' idea of two mathematics students who had no expertise on the Middle East. . . . (*ibid.*: 44, original emphases)

Half a century later, we can safely say that MATZPEN's new equation transformed Israeli politics and, in some sense, changed the world. The socialist-Zionist consensus has been cracked beyond repair. It is true that the world now is different from what it was in the 1960s, and that the postist newspeak has gained the high ground. But the critique that Aki and his friends presented back then still echoes, and their questions still resonate.<sup>7</sup>

A tiny group of people, surrounded by suspicion and hate, lacking any resources, with no support and against all odds, had managed to shake our perception and create a new reality.

And the solution? Only time will tell.

### **Autonarchy**

MATZPEN was also the logical answer to the Stalinist debasement of Marxism. As Aki described it, he and his friends grew sick and tired of playing gatekeepers for Soviet imperial interests. They didn't wish to end up like the Israeli Communist parties – from MAKI (Israeli Communist Party) to RAKACH (New Communist List) to HADASH (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) – whose functionaries kept silent on Khrushchev's (secret) confessions of Stalin's crimes and remained silent (while silencing others) when the Soviet Union abandoned the Communist revolutionaries of Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

Aki and his friends were not interested in the realpolitik of the Communist superpower. They wanted a revolution. Their thinking, politics and spirit were close to the Fourth (Trotskyite) International, and they maintained close ties with Trotskyite and Marxist revolutionaries among the popular Palestinian liberation movements.

But even the Trotskyite ideas, which Aki was first exposed to while in Britain, proved problematic. They were unable to address the basic problem of Marxism: the absence of democracy.

This problem haunted every Communist country, and Aki, inspired by Cornelius Castoriadis, offered a solution: *autonarchy*. Autonarchy for him meant a political system of self-rule, a regime of 'direct democracy' in which every member of society actively participates in the management of that society.<sup>8</sup>

This was no flash in the pan. For Aki, 'direct democracy' was not some utopian impracticality to be scribbled on a placard. It was a concrete answer to a fundamental problem. Over the years, defenders of socialism and Communism have blamed the regime's

<sup>7</sup> Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, 'To the New Readers Innocent of the Undeconstructed Past: On the Second Edition of "Peace, Peace, and No Peace"', Hebrew (Jerusalem and Montreal, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Akiva Orr, 'Autonarchy = Direct Democracy' (n.p., 2000).

authoritarianism on assorted ‘externalities’ – from the ‘ideological betrayal’ of political functionaries, to the gradual ‘corruption of the leadership’, to the debilitating process of ‘bureaucratization’. Aki rejected these excuses. The failure of socialism and Communism, he said, was not circumstantial, but foundational. These regimes were undermined not by their ‘special conditions’, but by the very theory that informed them. Their problem was not the ‘distortions’ introduced by Leninism, Stalinism or Maoism, but the original logic of Marx’s thesis.

Logic, though, is not a static concept, he noted. It develops dialectically, together with the changing historical context. In order for us to assess the merits of Marxism, we need some retrospect. And it is only now, more than a century after Marx, that we can begin to appreciate the contradictory manifestations of his theory.

Aki saw Marxism as a theory focused on private property, which, in our epoch, appears as capital. Capital controls and stirs industrial production for the purpose of accumulation. The accumulation process creates a class conflict between capitalists and productive workers. The capitalists leverage the political regime in order to legitimize exploitation and sanctify accumulation, while their workers, who witness their own exploited labour accumulating against them, organize and resist. For Marxists, the solution to this conflict is the abolition of private property and the socialization of the means of production. But this solution, said Aki, creates a new problem.

Regimes that ‘socialized the means of production’ did not liberate the workers; instead, they placed them under the control of state managers, technical experts, planners and public officials. Whereas labourers in capitalist countries submitted to the market and the associated institutions of the capitalist state, their counterparts in Communist countries were made to obey the Party, bureaucracy and military. The former surrendered their autonomy to capitalist exploitation, the latter to bureaucratic oppression.

It took Aki some time to reach this conclusion. His political awakening began in 1951, as a sailor on one of the striking ships in the Haifa Seamen Revolt. On that ship, he witnessed, first hand, the security forces attacking the strikers. He realized that the police and the army exist to protect not the subjects, but the political regime that rules those subjects. In the wake of this experience, he joined the leftist group of Moshe Sneh and later MAKI – where he was soon introduced to the other side of oppression.

His political transformation continued with the 1953 workers’ revolt in East Germany and the 1956 popular uprising in Hungary. Both movements were put down by a Soviet bloodbath of violence and mass arrests. And in both cases, the Communist parties kept silent.

The final wakeup call came with the 1968 Paris revolution. It was then that he realized the problem is not one of choosing between ‘private’ and ‘public’ property, but of attaining autonomy. Neither the greed-driven regime of private property nor the power-driven regime of public property is able to emancipate human beings, and for a simple reason: both are *premised* on excluding the vast majority of their subjects from running their own society.

Capitalist theories are produced and imposed by a sect of know-it-all experts and analysts with proprietary insight into the mysteries of the ‘economy’ and the secrets of the ‘market’. The role of this sect is to protect the regime and its inner core of big capitalists and top



managers. The latter group controls and directs everything of importance in the capitalist order – from technology and production, through desires and ideology, to the planetary ecology and the fate of the human race. The members of this group are convinced that they serve the interests of society (conveniently equated with their own).

Marxist theories, although very different from their capitalist counterparts, lead to a similar result. They give rise to a small cadre of omniscient political functionaries and pundits with superior insight into history's 'laws of motion'. These theoreticians reputedly know the needs of humanity and how to fulfil them; they can identify the required technologies and how to invent them; they cognize what constitutes proper education and how the masses should live; they decide what infrastructure will be used and whether to care for or ignore the natural environment. Moreover, they are convinced that this insight is best imposed through violence, brainwashing and deceit.

The only solution, said Aki, is a revolution. We need an entirely new regime, one that will be managed not by a narrow group of 'free marketeers' or 'Gosplanners', but by society as a whole. It was this conclusion that eventually led him to Castoriadis' historical philosophy of direct democracy.

The 1968 revolution in France showcased the practical potential of autonarchy. There was no need for brainwashing or mass re-education, Aki observed. The idea seemed almost natural. It spread rapidly and was accepted enthusiastically, as if it were part of humanity's 'practical reason'. Methods of self-rule were tried with varying degrees of success in many different settings. They were implemented in industrial factories and government offices, schools and universities, regional assemblies and city halls. They were even introduced into military units.

Eventually, the revolution fizzled out and died. Relieved by its demise, orthodox historians and mouthpiece journalists were quick to dismiss it as 'student riots' and statistical 'disturbances' that occasionally flare up on the margins of the established order. But this depiction, said Aki, merely revealed the defensive mode of the powers that be. The rulers of the world, both capitalist and socialist, know that they must keep their grip over the masses, and in 1968 they came close to losing it.

The events of that year, said Aki, were truly revolutionary: they marked the first modern manifestation of autonarchy. In this sense, the Paris uprising of 1968 was more important than the Russian Revolution of 1917. It represented an entirely new logic that threatens both capitalism and socialism and that will forerun the struggles of the twenty-first century.

### **The Wandering Circus**

Of course, none of this will happen automatically. Revolutionary ideas, said Aki, no matter how logical and ripe for their time, do not suddenly pop up into the heads of human beings. Not even in the era of 'market forces'. Autonarchy imperils the regime, and that means it will be fiercely resisted. The rulers, regardless of their gender, race and culture, will fight it tooth and nail. They will refuse to give up their private property, profits and perks, and they will certainly be unwilling to allow their subjects more than a token say in organizing society.

The war will be long and drawn out. There will be plenty of surprising twists, unexpected turns and disappointing setbacks. But the struggle has already started, said Aki, and it will not stop. It will continue, because, in the final analysis, human beings fight for logic and reason – precisely what direct democracy gives them.<sup>9</sup>

And so, soon enough, Aki found himself in the ideational trenches, fighting for autonarchy.

**Shimshon Bichler:** During the 1990s, I taught political economy at the Law Faculty of Haifa University. In every course, I would devote at least one session to a one-man show by Aki. Later, I also taught at various colleges, which gave Aki the opportunity to expand his performances to other locales.

We called these performances the ‘wandering circus’. Aki was the star, Eran Turbiner was the director/cameraman/producer, and I was the organizer. The performer, dressed in open sandals, a sailors’ coat and a knit cap (regardless of the weather), showed no inhibition. Quick to his feet, he immediately dominated the stage with his booming voice.

Eran and I knew the text by heart. We also knew the gestures, jokes and dramatic pauses. Yet we were always mesmerized. Even after ten years on the road, we still felt as if we were listening to him for the first time.

He usually talked about his own life, told as a political autobiography. The audience would be taken through the ups and downs of world history and learn how they shaped the narrator’s opinions and influenced his political consciousness.

The stories were wonderful. They started in Berlin in the early 1930s, where Aki’s mother, pushing her two-year old son in his stroller, noticed to her horror the toddler returning the ‘Heil Hitler’ salute of a smiling S.S. officer. The mother could not fathom her sole offspring becoming a Nazi, and the family soon moved to Palestine. Aki would then describe how, during the great Palestinian Revolt of 1937, he and his mother found refuge in the (now-ruined) Arab village of Lifta near Jerusalem; how, in 1946, he competed against and lost to the excellent Egyptian swimming team; how, in 1951, he found himself participating in a violent strike against the Israeli ruling class; how, while studying mathematics and physics at the Hebrew University, he became head of the Communist student cell; how he

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Aki’s view on this subject resembles Michel Houellebecq’s. In general, the two hold very different opinions, but there is one thing that both agree on: the strongest transformative force in history is *revolutionary ideas*. In his 2000 book *The Elementary Particles*, Houellebecq speaks about a ‘metaphysical mutation’, a radical global transformation in social values that tend to come at the hubris stage of a civilization. Such mutations, he argues, do not happen often. But once started, they are unstoppable. This is what happened with the rise of Christianity at the zenith of the Roman Empire and, again, with the emergence of scientific thinking at the apex of European feudalism.

Houellebecq, like Aki, considers the current wave of religious and ethnic movements as temporary. Aki often said that human consciousness, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The crisis of socialism and capitalism, he argued, creates an ideational emptiness, and this emptiness is quickly filled with religious mantras and postmodern slogans. But in the background there emerges a new metaphysical mutation – autonarchy. According to Houellebecq, science caught on because it offered something that the trickery and omens of religious dogma could never match: ‘rational certainty’. Science, he says, imposes logic and makes sense of the physical universe. And autonarchy, argued Aki, does the same for society: it offers a reasoned way to make sense of and organize the social universe.

was expelled from the Communist Party, and how his newly founded MATZPEN movement rattled the Zionist foreign propaganda machine; how he stopped being a Marxist (at least according to the conventional definitions); and how he joined the movement for autonarchy in the glorious days of the 1968 revolution in Paris.

At that point, the spectacle would climax. To dramatize the moment, Aki would slow down to recite, with a touch of pathos, the French strikers' demands for self-management. The strikers, he said, dismissed the 'generous' offers of the Gaullist regime and the Communist Party. They had no interest in what was on offer:

*'We don't want more bread; we want to run the bakery. . . .'*

From here onwards, the emphasis would shift from stories to analysis, from an alternative political history to the logic of direct democracy: 'How can a society of autonomous human beings', he would ask, 'collectively manage its social life for the good of its members?'

Despite his Marxist mannerisms, Aki was a 'technological determinist'. Human history for him was driven, first and foremost, by scientific and technological developments; class wars, cultural revolutions and political changes were mostly the consequences.

To make his point, he would search the many pockets of his old sailor's coat, eventually producing the victory gadget of autonarchy: a magnetic plastic card.

In Paris in 1968, he explained, the democratic logic of autonarchy was still hamstrung by technological limitations. The many action committees, spread all over France, lacked an effective communications infrastructure. They came up with many different ideas, demands and goals, but they had no means of communicating them, let alone putting them into collective practice.

'But now', his voice boomed, 'the time has come!'

Waving the little plastic card, he would explain how instant interactive communications and reliable electronic encoding make autonarchy feasible – nationally and perhaps even globally. We can now engage in long-distance mass discussion, debate and secure voting – and that ability enables us to finally dispense with all functionaries and go-betweens. There is no longer any need for dictators, ruling gangs, exploitative oligarchies or four-year 'representatives'. There is no reason to remain submissive for years on end in exchange for a one-day holiday called 'elections'.

The age of reason has arrived.

When his listeners expressed doubt and skepticism, Aki was endlessly patient. There are no ready-made solutions, he would say – none 'from above', and certainly none from self-appointed 'experts'. Reasoned solutions can emerge only through interactive social experimentation – and even then there are no guarantees. There are always mistakes and mishaps, with good solutions invariably accompanied by bad ones. But autonarchic decisions, whether good or bad, have one important advantage: they can be *changed*. Even if the majority errs – for example, in deciding to bring in the death penalty, or to hold onto occupied territories – it can always reverse its own decision.

Not so with 'representative governments' (as the rulers and their servants like to call their organizations). Once elected, the 'representatives', seeking their own ends, can wreak havoc on the underlying population, with the only recourse being the next election, when the 'voters' are allowed to 'choose' a different set of 'representatives'. This method brings despair. It causes people to lose hope and mistrust democracy, to look inward instead of outward. They become alienated individuals, isolated atoms that no longer try to alter their collective fate.

Although his logic seemed compelling, Aki found it difficult to answer the question posed by Professor Philip Philipovich, the transfiguring surgeon in Bulgakov's novel *The Heart of a Dog*:

. . . if I begin to sing in chorus in my apartment every evening instead of operating, it will lead to ruin. . . It is impossible to serve two gods! It is impossible at one and the same time to sweep the streetcar tracks and settle the fate of Spanish beggars!<sup>10</sup>

Aki's idea of autonarchy seems to take for granted the nature of technology and production, as if they were objectively 'given' to society. But this is hardly the case. Every invention, innovation, production line and labour process, not to mention 'entrepreneurship' and 'investment', is deeply embedded in the logic of capital and its mode of power. A PG&E utility plant, a JPMorgan Chase office building or a Google data centre are not stand-alone entities, separate from the social context in which they operate. Their design and construction, their employees' education and training, the way they are used and abused are all intertwined with the gist and purpose of the regime. It seems to us an illusion to think that this inherently capitalist infrastructure can somehow be taken over, 'as is', by direct democracy.

At the end of the show, students would line up to speak with Aki and buy his books. Many of them were women, and a fair number of those women were Arab. Minority groups, especially those seeking change, found Aki easy to connect with.

### **A Chain of Stories**

Over the past decade, Aki produced his books and articles on his own, without a publisher. He would print them at Beit Hanina in East Jerusalem and 'distribute' them in person. His design and layout left much to be desired. The footnotes were often larger than the text, the font would suddenly change, the pages were not always centred and some editorial markings were left uncorrected. When we drew his attention to the aesthetic drawbacks, he seemed perplexed. 'The important thing is the content, not the form', he said. 'Those who recycle dogmas need snappy designs to catch the eye; I don't'. Sometimes he used approximate

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<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Afanas Evich Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, Translated from the Russian by Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 37.

rather than definitive numbers. At others, the evidence he marshalled would be imprecise. His critics used these oversights to attack his underlying ideas, but Aki remained unfazed: ‘. . . history is not a random collection of dates, events and numbers; it’s the understanding of processes. . . .’ It was obvious he couldn’t connect with the postists.

During the 2000s, his war effort for autonarchy intensified. There were more and more anarchist groups in Israel, and Aki would eagerly address them in abandoned warehouses, worn-out cafés and street demonstrations. His talks covered a wide range of subjects and catered to different audiences. He would lecture to retired Yekkes (Jews of German descent) on the history of modern physics and speak to high school students on cosmology. No invitation was refused, and no audience was ever disappointed. Aki’s creative fusion of autobiographical stories, history and theory kept them at the edge of their seats.

There was, however, another set of stories – equally fascinating and politically spicy, yet more personal – that Aki never shared in public. Over the years, we tried to persuade him to put his tales into writing, and eventually he was swayed. In 2000 he issued *Hevzekim* (*Flashes*), followed in 2011 by its English version, *Enlightening Disillusionment*.

As a youngster, Aki taught mathematics at Alliance Jerusalem, and he remained a teacher at heart for ever afterwards. His *Enlightening Disillusionment*, written as a chain of stories, is sparkling, funny, enchanting and hopeful. It encourages you to rethink history, to examine it in a different way. The book recounts memories, thoughts and deeds from his days in Palestine, Israel, Britain and France – and again in Israel. Reading it, you can feel the real, humane story of the twentieth century bubbling up, the historical logic, so often concealed and destroyed, emerging from the depth of a forgotten memory.

It was like an anamnesis to us.

When we first read it, though, we noticed to our surprise that half of the stories he had told us – and often the more juicy ones – were missing. We pressed him on this point, and he finally confessed: he couldn’t write with malice about people – especially not about his comrades, even if their roads had parted. His book does not retell the splits within MATZPEN and his disputes with some of his friends (including his break with Machover after Aki had abandoned Marxism). There is nothing on hard drugs. There is no mention of difficult political experiences and disappointments. There is no reference to mistakes and regrets, and there are no personal or intimate tales. Even the ‘bad’ stories – for example, the bitter disappointment with and expulsion from MAKI, or the confrontation with the Zionist-Israeli establishment at home and abroad – are told without bile or ill will. There is no sabre rattling with former enemies, no settling of accounts, no gloat.

### On Simplicity and Proportions

**Jonathan Nitzan:** To be with Aki was to be immersed in stories. It was so from the very moment I met him. We had barely exchanged a few sentences before he asked me: ‘What turning point in your life made you a Marxist? Was it a political event? Something you participated in or witnessed? Was it a book you had read or a story you had heard? Was it a movie, or maybe a play?’ He was eager to hear my story.

But usually it was the other way around: Aki would be the storyteller and I the listener. I was not used to this ancient art of communication. The assertive telescreen and know-all internet have destroyed this art, and very few people engage in it nowadays. I was therefore amazed to see it practiced so charmingly and creatively by this vibrant elder.

In his own democratic bubble, Aki became my Socrates. His stories encouraged me to ask questions, to seek different paths, to look for what the Greeks called a 'method'.

My work with Shimshon has carried us into many uncharted territories. We explored the evolution of the Israeli ruling class and its accumulation through crisis; studied the political economy of Israeli inflation; traced the connections between the 'Weapondollar-Petrodollar Coalition' and Middle East 'energy conflicts'; and examined the transnational capitalization of Israel and the region. Recently, we began to sketch an alternative history of the capitalist mode of power, going back to its origins in fourteenth-century Europe. Aki often disagreed with our theoretical claims and historical writings, but he enthusiastically encouraged us to pursue them. He was always eager to engage new hypotheses, to hear of new research trajectories, to learn of new facts.

The thing that impressed me most about him, though, was his quest for simplicity. A short story is very much like a scientific claim or a mathematical equation: it is an effective way of making a point. Until the appearance of science and the emergence of formal logic, stories were the main venue through which people shared their thoughts and feelings. They told their stories not for utility or profit, but for beauty and enlightenment. And as Aki demonstrated so beautifully, the most enlightening stories are often the simplest.

My visits to Israel always included meetings with him. In one of those trips, on the day of my departure back to Canada, he called me to ask if he could come over. 'I want to bring you a present', he said. I was staying nearby, less than ten minutes by car from his home; but Aki, known for his philosophical driving, took a full hour to arrive. When he finally emerged from his beat-up vehicle, he had a huge envelope in his hand and a mischievous smile on his face. Slowly, he pulled out from the envelope an equally large photograph and presented it to me. It was entirely black – save for tiny white dots spread here and there. 'Do you remember the spacecraft *Voyager*, the one propelled in 1977 out of the solar system?' he asked. 'Well, this is one of the pictures taken from the *Voyager*, and this tiny white dot – right here – is planet Earth! I want you to take this photograph with you, for the future. It will help you keep things in proportion. . . .'

That picture still hangs over my desk.

But even proportions have to be kept in proportion. And that lesson, too, Aki managed to convey with typical simplicity.

The Pythagoreans, he said to us one afternoon as we were sitting in a Jaffa beach café watching the sunset, saw every magnitude in the universe as a 'rational number': a *ratio* – or 'proportion' – of two integers. Their approach seemed totalizing and encompassing, applicable everywhere in the cosmos. According to their logic, the distance between any two numbers – say 1 and 2 – is 'populated' by an infinite number of rational numbers. To see that this is the case, divide the distance by two to obtain another rational number (in this case,  $1\frac{1}{2}$ ). Repeating this division again and again will produce more and more rational numbers.



Eventually, after an infinite number of divisions, there will be ‘no more room’ left to squeeze in anything else.

It turns out, though, that this seemingly all-embracing logic is rather partial. The distance between 1 and 2 indeed contains an infinite number of rational numbers. But as the Pythagoreans themselves came to realize, regardless of how tightly we ‘pack’ these rational numbers together, there exists in the interstices between them a parallel world, equally infinite in size yet entirely different in logic – the universe of *irrational* numbers.

In other words, we can think of the same space as constituted, simultaneously, by two or more distinct ‘realities’, each with its own valid principles. This ability to imagine multiple co-existing logics is as beautiful as it is emboldening. It gives courage to break the envelope, to negate the dogma, to come up with a different way of thinking.

That ability allowed Democritus to invent the atom as a way of reconciling the frozen universe of Parmenides with the fluid world of Heraclitus. It enabled Hegel and Marx to contest rationalism and positivism with dialectical thinking. It opened the door for David Bohm to conceive the infinite ‘enfoldments’ of physical reality and for Cornelius Castoriadis to invent the ‘magmas’ of signification.

And it had a similar effect on us. It led us to think of capitalism as operating with two separate logics and therefore in need of two separate languages. The liberals offer a language based on utility, profit and capitalization, while the Marxists impose the language of labour and surplus. But each of these languages is all-encompassing, and that singularity is potentially misleading. We need to think not of one, but two intertwined logics: the logic of power and conflict pitted against the logic of creativity and cooperation; the dominant in-your-face world of profit and accumulation versus the underlying hidden world of resistance and transformation; the language of order against the language of *creorder*.

Is this not the anamnesis that Aki helped us rekindle?

### **The Scientist and the Church**

**Shimshon Bichler:** Aki loved to read and talk about books. He read everything – from science and history to literature and mysteries. Good books, of any kind, excited him. Innovative books set him on fire. He discussed them with great passion and often with much originality.

A conversation with Aki was a dialogue in the Greek sense of the term. It had nothing combative or acrimonious about it. Contrary to the ‘discursive’ fashion of the postists, Aki never tried to confuse, manipulate or humiliate his ‘opponent’, to trick in order to ‘win’. He conversed in order to foster understanding, to shed light, to help create something new. A dialogue with him was always open-ended. You never knew what you were going to get. Although old and half-deaf, he was more intellectually alert than most young people I know. It was a pleasure to visit him, and we dropped by as often as we could. His welcome was always joyous. There was never a hint of reservation. We would be invited to sip exotic coffee, to enjoy a box of dried dates, to try some homegrown grass.

He was the antithesis of an academic.

Conversations with academics are usually empty and boring. They tend to revolve around power relations, nominations, backstabbing and intrigue. They thrive on bad laughter. I have never had an academic provide me with a clear outline of a book he had read, let alone with what he had learned from it. I am yet to meet a single academic who would eagerly engage me with his research or hypotheses. What I usually hear is smearing, gossip, personal anecdotes and nasty commentary on theorists (but not their theories) – along with upbeat stories about vacations tied to conferences and other perks of the trade.

Aki engaged in none of these banalities. He was a true scientist. Original and creative, he knew to appreciate novelty and was quick to endorse it. He was excited by new technological inventions and loved to play with new gadgets.

But, above all, he was humble. He never demanded intellectual copyright – or, in fact, any rights at all. His position on this issue (which predated the Creative Commons movement) excited us. It suggested a way to undo the sabotage on knowledge. His books were preambled by an open challenge, a declaration of the creative-scientific spirit:

*It is permitted to copy, duplicate, photograph, record, translate, store in a knowledge base and distribute this book, in whole or in part, in any form and by any means . . . without written permission from anyone, on condition that the reproduction not be for profit and not distort the spirit of the text. . . .*

Note that Aki wrote ‘permitted’, but what he really meant was ‘recommended’.

I was deeply embarrassed one day in 2004 to see him standing outside a subsidized academic conference, selling/giving away his self-published books.

The conference was pompously titled ‘Against the Current’. Organized by slick Hebrew and Arab academics, it spoke highly of the Palestinian protests and the need for a different kind of democracy.

I queried one of the organizers on why they hadn’t invited Aki to give a talk. The professor looked at me with pity: ‘. . . Aki knows little about Greek democracy, and he has limited familiarity with Palestinian history. His books are simplistic and full of inaccuracies. This conference is for experts. . . .’

The inventor was facing the Golem. . . .

And Aki? He couldn’t care less. He was perfectly content to have young students buying his books. Those who were unable to pay received them for free. In fact, the way I know Aki, if it weren’t for the embarrassment, he would have gladly paid the students to read his books. He was like Pythagoras, the first scientist, who bribed his pupil to love mathematics.

### **Self-Consciousness and Autonomy**

During the 1960s, Aki read cosmology for a PhD at King’s College in London (where his classmates included future mathematical physicist Roger Penrose and cosmologist Stephen Hawking). Later, he enrolled in the first computer science course in the world. Both fields contributed to his life-long interest in ‘artificial intelligence’. Usually, this field is subsidized

by the rulers in the hope of tightening their control over their subjects and substituting obedient machines for unpredictable workers. Aki's approach was the very opposite. He thought that studying 'artificial intelligence' might shed light on self-consciousness, and that such an understanding could lead to autonomy and help emancipate human beings from their rulers. He once told us that, fifty years ago, he had started working on an algorithm to make a machine recognize itself. 'I'm still working on it', he added.

The last story in *Enlightening Disillusionment*, titled 'Suicide?' deals with this issue. The year is 1953, and Aki is sailing to Africa aboard a cargo vessel. In one of the ports, the crew members buy rhesus monkeys. Most are infants and die within days. But one adult female survives. Her owner ties her to a long rope on the deck, but she bites through the leash and runs away. The sailors chase and quickly corner the monkey at the rear end of the ship:

She stood on the railing looking at us and then at the sea below. She did this again, and again. We realized she was contemplating whether to jump into the sea – or not. No one made a move – or a sound. We didn't want her to jump. Finally she took one last look at us, and jumped into the sea. We were shocked. Her repeated looking at the sea below and then back at us indicated she realized that jumping into the sea meant death and was contemplating whether to live as a captive or to die. We were all deeply moved and depressed by her death. Did she really know that she would die if she jumped? Did she knowingly commit suicide? None of us had an answer but the possibility that she knowingly committed suicide tormented us. It still torments me. (*Enlightening Disillusionment*, p. 157)

**Jonathan Nitzan:** In some sense, Aki reminds us of the physicist Michael Beard, the protagonist of Ian McEwan's *Solar*.

Like Beard (though without the latter's nihilism), Aki always had a solid reference point, a stable locus to stand on – the scientific method. The world around him may have seemed in turmoil, full of unrelated events, surprises and disasters. But for Aki, there was logic behind the chaos: 'Let the philosophers of science delude themselves to the contrary', contemplates Beard, but 'physics was free of human taint; it describes a world that would still exist if men and women and all their sorrows did not. . . .'<sup>11</sup>

Aki's commitment to the scientific method blinded him to the rise of postism since the 1980s. Like McEwan's Beard, he found it difficult to understand the new, non-ontological physics. And like Beard, he stood helpless when the new enemies of enlightenment unleashed their 'black rhetoric' against science and reason. Their trickery, duplicity and avid ignorance left him baffled. Their protestations against 'hegemonic arrogance', 'reductionism' 'essentialism' and the 'crude objectivism that seeks to maintain and advance the social dominance of the white male elite' seemed to him innocent of any logic or system. Like Beard, he couldn't understand what they were talking about (and, between us, who can?).

<sup>11</sup> Ian McEwan, *Solar, A Novel*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2010), pp. 8-9.

Although Aki never said so explicitly, it seems that these developments were responsible, at least in part, for his return from England. Postism gradually took over the discourse, sending the advocates of enlightenment and progress into retreat. Religious zealots, culturalists and racists of various colours, ethnicities and genders were now front and centre. They peeled off the radical calls for reason, autonomy and change and spitefully discarded the ideas that generations of revolutionaries like Aki had struggled to create. Aki had little to look for in this 'like-reality'.

### **Aki and Friends**

Aki loved animals, perhaps because he found in them the simplest, most aesthetic logic. More than anything, he liked cats. His house was full of them. Some were very close and allowed onto his bed. Others were just fans who dropped by for a quick bite in the yard. When we came to visit, we often found him in his favourite position – lying on his back in bed, one hand holding a book and the other caressing a purring cat. The cats were everywhere – stretching, yawning, gazing at us with their dreamy eyes. Aki made it a point never to name them.

Human beings need names and titles, he explained. The political regime makes them indistinguishable, like standardized commodities. Haunted by fear of losing their 'identity', they are desperate for labels. They fight to be unique, to accentuate their differences, to protect their special culture. They would turn into serial killers for a whiff of immortality.

Cats need none of these signs and symbols. They are *already* special. They are untrainable and forever different. Some are woolgathering while others quick-witted. There are edgy cats and calm ones, curious and conservative, skinny and plump, thorny and velvety, ugly and beautiful. Some are aggressive while others are timid. But *evil* cats? There is no such thing. There will be the occasional skirmish over fast food and quick sex. But to organize a world war? To have millions of cats marching to slaughter and be slaughtered? And for what? For a flag, religion or nationality? Or worse still – for 'leaders' who wave flags, religions and nationalities? No my friend. You won't find this oddity among the animals.

Aki's house in Kfar Shmaryahu had a large yard where he would feed his cats. One day we noticed him throwing pieces of meat into the distant shrubs. Strangely, the cats stayed away from the freshly served food. 'I'm feeding the mongooses', he explained triumphantly.

Mongooses . . . ?!

A new asphalt road had severed the mongooses from their habitat, so they landed at Aki's. They must have known, back from their days in London, that marginalized minorities and political refugees are always welcome in his quarters.

The mongoose is a small, beautiful carnivore with a delicate face, but as readers of Jack London's *White Fang* will know, its teeth and claws can be deadly. The mongoose is generally shy. It doesn't trust animals, especially humans.

It was therefore an impressive sight to watch Aki's acolytes gather for their daily meal: the noisy cats would swarm around him and brush against his legs, while the stealthy mongooses would wait tensely under the bushes.

In the beginning, we didn't actually see the mongooses. But in subsequent visits, we could sometimes spot them, threading carefully on the outer perimeter of the yard. And then came the big day. Aki was beaming with pride: that afternoon he was woken up from his siesta by a mongoose pup! The pup, which had snuck in through the open door, climbed onto the bed among the squatting cats and gently caressed Aki's cheek with his paw: he was hungry and demanded that his meal be promptly served.

Upon our arrival, Aki was already busy feeding his flock. The animals were still in two groups, but they were no longer afraid to approach each other. There were occasional grumbles over disputed pieces of meat, but Aki easily silenced them with additional slices.

Looking at us with a broad smile, he said: 'See, if cats and mongooses can live peacefully in my yard, there should be no reason why Palestinians and Israelis cannot live together in one democratic society . . . We can always start from two states, but in the end it will become obvious that one is better. . . .'<sup>12</sup>

Aki befriended animals and human beings alike. It was difficult not to like him – and as a single child, he needed and craved warmth and attention. But underneath the extroverted empathy was a solitary, impenetrable core. One time he confided to us that, more than anything, he liked being 'with himself'.

He always tried to get the most out of life. He never complained – about anything. Not even when his health deteriorated and the nasty reality of Netanyahu's privatized healthcare system hit him. He remained eternally optimistic. 'The situation is only getting better', he would say. 'Another small heart cath, a new valve and a replaced hip, and I'm like new'.

His financial situation was getting worse. His debts ballooned, and excess interest charges made them impossible to 'service'. Eventually, he was forced to sell his modest home in Kfar Shmaryahu and buy a cheaper one in Tnuvot. His hope was that, after paying his bank loans, there would be enough left for him to live on. But his accounting was never as good as his mathematics, and he rarely tracked his bills. Eventually, he had to remortgage his house, and the deprivation started to weigh on him. In his last few weeks, he was visibly depressed. No one cared for him at home, and he was too proud to seek help. For the first time in his life, he looked old. He would stay in bed for days, eating very little. The spark in eyes was gone.

He died alone, surrounded by his cats.



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<sup>12</sup> Aki's animal metaphor resembles Aldous Huxley's suggestion, made in his 1962 novel *Island*, on how to educate children to be tolerant.