

Back to the Stone Age?

Gary Snyder asks, Poetry or Machines?

Peter Werbe

1977

a review of

"The Politics of Ethnopoetics" in *The Old Ways, Six Essays*, Gary Snyder, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 40077 "(Reckoning roughly from the earliest cave paintings)", 96 pp.

Ever since the dawn of industrial capitalism 200 years ago, a succession of philosophers, poets, social scientists, and mystics have written on the decline of the species since leaving "the state of nature" and entering the modern epoch. Hence, it could be charged, that there is little that is new in this book and much that has been heard from sources whose nostalgia for the days of yore is of a short lasting duration broken by a return to the middle-class life that spawns such ideas.

Almost all radical thought from Marxism through to anarchist thinkers like Murray Bookchin in his *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* take as a pre-condition for revolutionary change the continuing development of our productive capacity and view any reversal of the process as reactionary. However, just as we would never allow the conservatism of the ruling ideas to govern the direction of our thinking, neither should we allow what formerly passed as radical ideas to have a similar restraining effect.

Civilization is The Culprit

The value then of the book under consideration is that Snyder calls into question the basic assumptions of modern society and very directly indicts the whole edifice of civilization as the culprit in the predicament humans have gotten themselves into.

What is being directly confronted is the concept of progress itself. The history of the species has always been taught to us as the history of progress—out of the oceans, out of the caves, into the fields, into the factories, etc.—without ever really stopping to ask what was the yardstick being used that identified cave dwellers as unfortunate, while seeing the wage workers of Europe and North America as blessed. Nobody ever turned, looking at each group and said, "Gee, are they happy?"

People seem to have the capacity to simultaneously hold a positive notion of civilization and progress while compartmentalizing the knowledge that contact with the modern world by thriving and happy pre-industrial people has always led to their immiseration and extermination. Why is there not the realization that the same process occurred to our forebears as well and we are just their domesticated descendants who can be satisfied with camping in the wilderness for two weeks a year as a substitute for the life our species once led?

To Snyder (after Levi-Strauss and Sahlins), the species began its decline at the end of the Paleolithic Age when hunting and gathering ceased to be the dominant form of sustenance and was replaced by the agriculturally-based

Neolithic Age. With the ability to produce large surpluses through stored crops, the centralized state, the patriarchal family and class structure emerged; first only on a small section of the planet involving a limited number of people, but that process now nears completion after-eight thousand years of “civilization” with the final destruction at hand of the remaining Stone Age cultures still lingering in the hinterlands of Brazil, Australia and the Philippines.

The decline comes about as the form of human association changes. In an unpublished manuscript, Gerry Winstanley makes the point, “Once a group of people came to rely on agriculture completely, and forgot how to live by hunting and gathering, they could no longer run away en masse into the wilderness to escape slavery.” Hence, the State becomes permanent. Or as Snyder writes,

“Society providing buffers and protection of an increasingly complicated order so that as it became larger in scope and populations larger in size, it protected individuals from those demands for speed, skill, knowledge, and intelligence that were common in the Upper Paleolithic. The personal direct contact with the natural world required of hunters and gatherers—men and women both—a tremendous continual awareness.”

The quick answer, “Well, who doesn’t want to be safe from tigers,” misses entirely what also that “safety” brings—a domesticated species that has all of its affairs that were once handled directly now mediated by the State and commodity relationships so that it seems perfectly natural and reasonable that all aspects of what we do with both our labor and leisure time, where we live and how we live are chosen for us with humans figuring in the equation only as an afterthought.

Rapacious Dangers of the State

Safety from the elements was “won” (a dubious victory) only at the expense of being now exposed to the rapacious dangers of the State and, most importantly, the loss of community with its concept of “place” and definition for the species. Missing those elements, articulated through song, dance, myth and poetry and accepting instead, a society of mediation, is what Camatte calls the “wandering of humanity.”

Snyder knows his anthropology and his ecology, but seems to be influenced by Marxists in those fields even though he realizes their limitations. He states, “Marxists, granted the precision of their critique on most points, often have a hard time thinking clearly about primitive cultures, and the usual tendency is to assume that they should become civilized.” Snyder sees this as a flaw rather than realizing what he has stated puts him into direct opposition with the Marxist project.

As a part of the intellectual development of the bourgeois era, Marxism contains all of its assumptions including the one mentioned by Snyder. To Marx and Engels people were not even human until they entered class society and to them (including their modern epigones like Evelyn Reed in *Women’s Evolution*) the destruction of primitive communities is a positive and progressive thing, just as the development of capitalism is positive, all enveloped in the mystical view of progress that along this continuum will be created a wonderful world out of the stuff that heretofore has created mostly misery.

Drive Toward Monoculture

Again there is never the central evaluation of the effect all of this progress of the last 8,000 years has had on the planet and its inhabitants. Snyder contends that it has been a disaster, and one that is increasing in its intensity with civilization’s drive toward world-wide monoculture. The tendency away from species-diversity makes our lives extremely precarious since we have become totally dependent upon the continuous, smooth functioning of a highly centralized political and technical apparatus. Yet, all of this is built into both the capitalist and Marxist view of the world. Although none of us are willing to relinquish the comforts of modern life, if we take as our starting point the technology created in the modern epoch, we will be sure to continue its social forms as well. At some point there has to be a sorting out of what we want in terms of human relationships and only then think about what is possible technologically.

People in the Upper Paleolithic era worked only about 15 hours a week according to Marshall Sahlins in his *Stone Age Economics* and never tried to maximize production or produce a surplus apparently preferring to spend more of their time in play, dance, song and magic. That choice of preferences is gone from our epoch where the work-a-day world has been steadily increasing in time spent since that “primitive” era. Are those the choices then?—machines or song and poetry? It’s not entirely clear, except that for certain, the former has obliterated the latter where ever it has touched the folk and people always mirror what is at the center of their society—in ours it’s the machine.

Snyder says the “politics of ethnopoetics” is seeing what “industrial technological civilization is doing to the earth,” but none of this should be taken as a call to return to the caves of our ancestors (the only way that will be done is Gen. Curtis LeMay-style). It means to stop accepting the planet as we find it, to re-inhabit it as free humans, and to re-define ourselves through our song and poetry.

Snyder ends thusly, “Such poetries will be created by us as we re-inhabit this land with people who know they belong to it...The poems will leap out past the automobiles and TV sets of today into the vastness of the Milky Way (visible only when the electricity is turned down)...These poesies to come will help us learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with the other people—non-humans included—brothers and sisters.”

This is a vision of survival and revolution.

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