

Zerzan Replies

“If we reach ‘alarming’ conclusions, then we do.”

John Zerzan

Bob Brubaker’s defense of agriculture [this issue, FE #330, Winter, 1988–89] seems to have two main components, one in which agriculture itself recedes in favor of “symbolic exchange.” Here it is argued that “symbolism, not agriculture, was the sun around which primitive life revolved,” and that “where there is symbolic interaction with nature, ecological destruction doesn’t take place.” But while it is more pleasant to hear the voices of ceremonials and rituals than to contemplate the ravages of agriculture, reality must also be encountered.

My essay contains many specifics that exhibit the horrendous consequences of agriculture on our species and the natural world—which Bob ignores. “Symbolic exchange with gods,” (never mind the alienation and oppression of religion, which Bob also has, seemingly no problem with) does not change the record, a record he fails to refute in even one particular.

“Symbolic” utterances have been used throughout all of agriculture to sanctify not only the domestication of flora and fauna (including homo sapiens) but also human sacrifice, the inauguration of wars, etc., etc. Symbolic practices cannot be used to obscure the real developments of agriculture, which Jared Diamond rightly summed up as a “catastrophe.”

Bob’s second line of defense is to argue that small- scale agriculture is fine (which brings to mind Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful pitch, popular among non-radicals in the ‘70s: capitalism is fine as long as it’s small). Bob cites one or two examples of marginal agricultural practices and uses them to say that it isn’t agriculture per se that is malignant. Perhaps the same could be argued for industrial civilization, one slight problem, among others, is its tendency to conquer what is less industrialized.

Bob doesn’t really go into why he can find so very few remaining islands of supposedly OK, small-scale agriculture; that would reveal the inner logic of agriculture and its world domination. (For Bob, not only domestication, but also war is OK if on a small scale, by the way!)

My study of agricultural peoples led me to conclude, generally speaking, that insofar as a tribal people is agricultural, to that degree it is alienated and oppressive. I pointed out that subjugation of women is a function of agriculture; as is hierarchy; also religion. There may be exceptions, but a year’s reading demonstrated to me that it really is that simple. Since everyone, including Bob, has assumed that agriculture is a positive good, these points have heretofore not been made.

Bob’s concluding point is that to question agriculture itself is to raise the despair level, since, admittedly, I have no solution handy as to how to reverse and defeat domestication in a world of five billion. All I can say is that I’m in no way despairing myself; rather, I’m excited about exploring—and possibly refusing—another given by which this world has degraded us. I don’t feel that my essay that Bob has criticized should be accepted as etched in stone, but I certainly do feel that to seek the truth is to try to be guided essentially by the lights of honesty alone. If we reach “alarming” conclusions, then we do. Then we’ll have to try harder to meet the challenge, a challenge that just might lead toward qualitative liberation.

—John Zerzan

Eugene, Oregon

P.S. I'm grateful to Jeff Sniderman, who is active in the theory and practice of alternative systems, for showing me a very new book from Australia, *Horticulture, Ecology and Conservation*, by G.W. Carr, J.M. Robin and R.W. Robinson. This work examines such experimental approaches as Mollison's "permaculture," to reach the following sobering conclusion: "Let us make it quite clear that any form of agriculture (i.e., artificial ecosystem) is ecologically undesirable."

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