

# The Question of Agriculture

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One irony of the deep ecology discussion is that almost at the same time that some deep ecologists were taking an explicit position for the abolition of agriculture as the prime cause of the widening spiral of civilization and ecological destruction, John Zerzan wrote an almost identical thesis in the pages of the *Fifth Estate*. (See "Agriculture: Essence of Civilization," FE #329, Summer 1988.) For a response to Zerzan, see Bob Brubaker's "Comments on Zerzan's Critique of Agriculture" in FE #330, Winter 1988–89.)

Zerzan, like the deep ecology catastrophists, condemns not only agriculture but all cultivation as "the triumph of estrangement and the definite divide between culture and nature and humans from each other," as well as "the birth of production." True to the very objective rationalist tradition of the civilization he wishes to excoriate, Zerzan keeps looking for the prime mover and first cause of alienation, for the moment of The Fall, finding it ultimately in an incoherent rejection of symbolic activity itself. (See in particular "Language: Origin and Meaning" and responses in FE #315, Winter, 1984. "As soon as a human spoke, he or she was separated," he writes there. "This rupture is the moment of dissolution of the original unity between humanity and nature." In his latest essay, agriculture becomes "the materialization" of that estrangement.)

"Wild or tame, weeds or crops speak of that dualism that cripples the soul of our beings," Zerzan writes. But it is just such a dualism that Zerzan imposes on prehistory; eventually, he is bound to find an even deeper alienation in the 'dualism between food and non-food, or perhaps in sex difference, or between the organism itself and its environment. Following such a logic, all cultivation—from the plantings of a primal horticulturist to the petrochemical factory farming of industrial capitalism—must be abolished if we are to be free. I wish him luck, but he will forgive me, I hope, if I stop short of boarding his ship.

Zerzan's argument essentially reiterates the ideology, from ecological reductionism, of the "natural state." Thus any intervention or modification of the land by human beings particularly domestication of species, but also by implication the collecting and sowing of seeds in general—is seen as "unnatural." Using anthropological evidence and Baudrillard's acute critique of marxism, Brubaker has refuted with great élan the idea that planting is automatically production, so I will not repeat his arguments here. But I will add some remarks. One needn't be an ardent defender of technological conquest of nature to recognize the problems in the view that no domestication is natural. In fact, there are examples among other species to suggest that organisms enter into symbioses with other organisms that look very similar to agriculture. In particular, one might mention the South American leafcutter ants studied by E.O. Wilson and described in his book *Biophilia*. This art is in reality a colony which Wilson describes as a superorganism, since several different sizes and kinds of ants cooperate to collect leaves, carry them to the colony, crush and mold them into moist pellets and insert them into a similar material. "This mass ranges in size between a clenched fist and a human head, is riddled with channels, and resembles a gray cleaning sponge," he writes. "It is the garden of the ants: on its surface a symbiotic fungus grows which, along with the leaf sap, forms the ants' sole nourishment..."

And that is not all: "The gardening cycle proceeds. Worker ants...pluck loose strands of the fungus from places of dense growth and plant them onto the newly constructed surfaces. Finally, the very smallest—and most abundant—

workers patrol the beds of fungal strands, delicately probing them with their antennae, licking their surfaces clean, and plucking out the spores and hyphae of alien species of mold..." The gardening of the leafcutters resembles agriculture: the ants modify their environment by turning vegetation into mushrooms for their own sustenance; they cultivate the fungus and even weed alien organisms from their gardens. Does this justify agribusiness? Hardly, but if leafcutters are shrewd enough to weed wild stuff from their gardens to enhance the growth of their beloved fungus, Zerzan's argument about alienation and dualism becomes problematic.

Likewise, the absolute dualism between planting and hunting-gathering is an imposition of modern categories on societies to which they may not apply. Zerzan argues that "artificiality and work" steadily increase to end "life as mainly sensuous activity." He should try his hand at making arrowheads sometime, or working leather for clothing. The digging stick of the gatherer, in fact, not only precedes but suggests that of the cultivator. For Zerzan the calendar is a "schedule of civilization...integral to civilization," yet the calendar existed for hunter-gatherers and the notion of seasonal time occurs long before agriculture. As Lewis Mumford writes in *Technics and Human Development*, "the initial steps leading to domestication go back to the food collecting stage." He mentions inscriptions on 35,000-year-old reindeer bones, very possibly a lunar calendar. "If one seeks evidence only of changes in a culture," Mumford writes, "one may pass by equally significant evidence of continuity."

As for cultivation being the "birth of production," there is, after all, a certain kind of rationalism and objectification in hunting (driving groups of animals over cliffs, etc.) that could also be seen as "production" if primal horticulture can. If the agriculturist turned the world into a barnyard, as naturalist Paul Shepard has argued, it may have been because hunters had already turned it into a slaughterhouse. It should be clear that culturally charged terms will lead us nowhere.

Hunters also modified the environment. One example is the use of fire. "Indeed the use of fire to promote certain grasses and trees, and along with them, grazing animals like wallaby and kangaroo, was so extensive that it has been argued that the ecology of Australia is the single greatest human artifact," write the anonymous authors of the pamphlet *Whitewash: Australia's Bicentenary—Another History* (published in 1988 by the Melbourne Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation). If this formulation seems exaggerated, it is nevertheless backed up by William Cronon's fine book on the history and ecology of colonial New England, *Changes in the Land*.

Cronon's description of New England native peoples and the contrast between their environmental practices and that of the European settlers, reveals how schematic is the agriculture/nonagriculture dichotomy. An ecosystem, Cronon argues, is not entirely an equilibrium (there is no perfect balance or harmony, with or without humans). The environment goes through both cyclic and linear, historic changes. Human beings bring about historic changes in the land, but in decidedly different ways depending on their attitudes and practices toward the land. To some degree, the land itself—the soil and the forms of the land—present different possibilities for interaction by different people.

The northern and southern New England native peoples were different, for example, the northerners being simply hunter-gatherers and the southerners being both cultivators and hunter-gatherers. This was to a great degree a result of the different kinds of soils and other natural characteristics of the region. Furthermore, agriculture was, as it probably was in most places, developed by women, and for New England natives it brought women a large degree of voice and autonomy. Not only this, but by burning the forest (which occurred more in the south), "Indians created ideal habitats for a host of wildlife species...because the enlarged areas actually raised the total herbivorous food supply, they not merely attracted game but helped create much larger populations of it." The burning practices not only enlarged the numbers of species such as elk, deer, turkey, and beaver, but as these populations increased, so did those of the predators. "In short," he argues, "Indians who hunted game animals were not just taking the 'unplanted bounties of nature'; in an important sense, they were harvesting a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating." How conscious, and how instrumental the people were, is a matter of discussion, but it is a persuasive idea that the Indians practiced what Cronon calls "a more distant kind of husbandry of their own," even if they did not keep domesticated animals. In a word, they practiced a kind of primal stewardship of the land and played a role in its natural cycles through their practices.

When the Europeans, who "treated their land as a resource to be mined until it was exhausted," conquered the lands, ecological breakdown began to occur. So it isn't simply a question of cultivation or not, but one of connectedness and reverence as opposed to estrangement and instrumentalism. Buffalo Bird Woman, a Hidatsa planter

from Minnesota, told the euroamerican ethnologist Gilbert L. Wilson, “We cared for our corn in those days as we would care for a child; for we Indian people loved our gardens, just as a mother loves her children; and we thought that our growing corn like to hear us sing, just as children like to hear their mother sing to them.” (See *Buffalo Bird Woman’s Garden: Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987.)

Another such example of reverence for ecological health can be found among the Papago of Arizona and Sonora. According to Gary Nabham, two similar oases some thirty miles apart from one another reveal the complex relationship between human beings and habitat. One was taken over by the U.S. Park Service and turned into a wildlife refuge in the early 1960’s. All Papago cultivation ceased. In the other oasis, Papagos continued to live and plant in their traditional way. Yet Nabham reports that the diversity of the habitat and the numbers and diversity of birds are declining in the “protected” (unmodified) area. “The old trees are dying. Few new ones are being regenerated. There are only three cottonwoods left and four willows. These riparian trees are essential for the breeding habitat of certain birds. Summer annual seedplants are conspicuously absent from the pond’s surroundings. Without the soil disturbance associated with plowing and flood irrigation, these natural foods for birds and rodents no longer germinate.” Naturalists identified more than sixty-five species of birds in the Papago community and only thirty-two at the “natural” refuge.

When Nabham told his Papago friend about the discrepancies he was discovering, the man replied, “I’ve been thinking over what you say about not so many birds living over there any more. That’s because those birds, they come where the people are. When the people live and work in a place, and plant their seeds and water their trees, the birds go live with them. They like those places, there’s plenty to eat and that’s when we are friends to them.” (Gary Nabham, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country*, North Point Press, 1982.)

Commenting on this passage, conservation biologist David Ehrenfeld writes, such a situation occurs when people live in a way “compatible with the existence of the other native species of the region. When that happens—and it happens more than you may think—the presence of people may enhance the species richness of the area, rather than the negative effect that is more familiar to us.” (See “Life in the Next Millennium: Who Will Be Left in the Earth’s Community?” in *The Last Extinction*, edited by Kenneth Mallory and Les Kaufman.) Does this line of reasoning mean that anything goes, as the agribusiness and tree-cutting corporations might want us to think? Hardly.

There is no doubt some troubling relationship between sedentarism and agriculture, the origins of kingship and the state, patriarchy and an instrumentalism towards nature—at least where civilizations emerged. And many old stories are left that suggest this problematic relationship, such as that reported by H.P. Duerr in his book *Dream-time*, from the Khasi people, whose ancestors, it seems, “wanted to make gardens and needed the rays of the sun that could not penetrate the leaves” of an enormous tree that once shaded them. “So they felled it. But as the tree thundered to the ground, the sky dissolved and disappeared above. Now they were able to enjoy the fruits of the earth, but the navel cord to the sky had been torn forever.”

One can see a harkening back to primordial times in this story, but none of us can restore the “navel cord to the sky.” And even hunter-gatherers had such stories about the Golden Age. In a sense, we are like the ants described by Wilson. “Through a unique step in evolution taken millions of years ago,” he writes, “the ants captured a fungus, incorporated it into the superorganism, and so gained the power to digest leaves. Or perhaps the relation is the other way around: perhaps the fungus captured the ants and employed them as a mobile extension to take leaves into the moist underground chambers... In either case, the two now own each other and will never pull apart...”

I would not attempt to make a direct correlation between the natural evolution of ants and the cultural evolution of humanity, but in any case, we and the land have both gone through an enormous series of historical changes, and we are not about to abolish all domestication of species and return to the paradise of the Pleistocene. Thus Zerzan is welcome to raise questions about the origins of domestication, but his air of finality and certainty about such obscure events and what they tell us about our choices today may say more about a certain kind of critical and political discourse than it does about prehistory.

Hence, while it is within reason to deconstruct industrialism and mass technics, it is a sad and despairing fantasy to argue for the abolition of plant cultivation (let alone the abolition of language) without the Malthusian mass die-off envisioned by deep ecology catastrophists. In reply to such criticism, Zerzan has responded, “if we reach ‘alarming’ conclusions, then we do” (FE #330, Winter 1988–1989). This is obviously not a very satisfactory

response, implying as it does (whether Zerzan acknowledges it or not) that if mass die-off is the result, then so be it.

While John should consider just how far he's willing to go with his alarming conclusions, most people will prefer to salt their bread with even a bit of alienation if those are the choices. People with a sense of connection to those around them people with children, perhaps—are likely to ask next: who will feed the children? And if the idea of “feeding the children” has now become a religious homily for the secular humanist civilization in which permanent starvation is an everyday reality for a fifth of all children, that does not respond to the question. Zerzan's harsh response to the question of bread, it seems to me, flows from the kind of separated, dismembering and decontextualized forms of discourse that his idea of explicating the origins of alienation hopes to escape.

As for symbolism itself, like agriculture, there may be some seed of our separation from and war with nature internal and external—there as well, but that only leads back to the “original sin” idea of deep ecology misanthropy, the old “four legs good, two legs bad” refrain; it lies so far back in our evolution that it suggests that there is something uniquely wrong with us as a species. But at that level, as I have argued elsewhere, what is natural and what is not is meaningless. Such fantasies conceal a deeper pessimism that harkens back to amoebic origins; they mystify the real problems of megatechnic civilization's destructive agriculture by identifying it with all forms of cultivation, just as they confuse the colonization of language by power with language itself. Thus authentic social transformation is diverted by the theory that claims to speak for it.

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