

# Beyond Backward and Forward

On Civilization, Sustainability, and the Future

Derrick Jensen

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## Introduction by Sunfrog

When I first connected with the radical milieu in the mid-1980s, certain books and writers changed me. Activists passed around dog-eared, marked-up volumes that would transform people forever. A certain work would be read by everyone in a scene, becoming a sort of collective scripture; backpacks brimmed with propaganda, the tastiest tome like a textual talisman.

Derrick Jensen writes books like that. Lately, his searing nonfiction, particularly the lightning rod *Language Older Than Words*, has captivated countless readers fed up with the abundant hypocrisy and arrogant unsustainability of modern life. Synthesizing stories, research, and experience into seamless narrative swords drawn to skewer the social lie, Jensen channels that rare ability to turn inchoate intuition into articulate ammunition, a language older than words that will dismantle institutions.

In planning an issue on primitivism, we knew we needed to contact Derrick Jensen. We were curious what philosophies and theories attracted him. How would he situate himself in the debates about the fundamental aspects of human folly? Does Jensen call himself an anarchist? What does he think of deep ecology? He responded to our inquiry like this:

“I don’t think so much about primitivism, or anarchism, or deep ecology. I want to live in a world with more wild salmon every year than the year before, more migratory songbirds, more natural forest communities, more fish in the ocean, less dioxin in every mother’s breast milk. And I’ll do what it takes to get there. And what it will take is for us to dismantle everything we see around us. It will take, at the very least, the destruction of civilization, which has been killing the planet for 6000 years. If that’s primitivism, then I guess I’m a primitivist. If that’s deep ecology, then I’m that. If that’s anarchism, then I’m that. But the labels don’t matter much to me.”

Although Jensen wasn’t writing for *FE* when we first explored the themes that this issue “reconsiders,” we’re certainly glad he is with us now. What follows is an excerpt from a forthcoming book tentatively titled *What Goes Up ...*. To buy some of his books, see our infoshop on page 62. For more information about him, visit his website, [www.derrickjensen.org](http://www.derrickjensen.org)

Years ago I was riding in a car with friend and fellow activist George Draffan. He has influenced my thinking as much as any other one person. It was a hot day in Spokane. Traffic was slow. A long line waited at a stop light. I asked, “If you could live at any level of technology, what would it be?”

As well as being a friend and an activist, George can be a curmudgeon. He was in one of those moods. He said, “That’s a stupid question. We can fantasize about living however we want, but the only sustainable level of

technology is the stone age. What we have now is the merest blip—we're one of only six or seven generations that ever have to hear the awful sound of internal combustion engines (especially two-cycle)—and in time we'll return to the way humans have lived for most of their existence. Within a few hundred years at most. The only question will be what's left of the world when we get there."

He's right, of course. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that any social system based on the use of nonrenewable resources is by definition unsustainable: in fact it probably takes anyone but a rocket scientist to figure this one out. The hope of those who wish to perpetuate our culture is something called "resource substitution," whereby as one resource is depleted another is substituted for it (I suppose there is at least one hope more prevalent than this, which is that if we ignore the consequences of our actions they will not exist). Of course on a finite planet this merely puts off the inevitable, ignores the damage caused in the meantime, and begs the question of what will be left of life when the last substitution has been made. Question: When oil runs out, what resource will we substitute in order to keep the industrial economy running? Unstated premises: a) equally effective substitutes exist; b) we want to keep the industrial economy running; and c) keeping it running is worth more to us (or rather to those who make the decisions) than the human and nonhuman lives destroyed by the extraction, processing, and utilization of this resource.

## **Hyperexploit, deplete, and die**

Similarly, any culture based on the nonrenewable use of renewable resources is just as unsustainable: if fewer salmon return each year than the year before, sooner or later none will return. If fewer ancient forests stand each year than the year before, sooner or later none will stand. Once again, the substitution of other resources for depleted ones will, say some, save civilization for another day. But at most this merely holds off the inevitable while it further damages the planet. This is what we see, for example, in the collapse of fishery after fishery worldwide: having long-since fished out the more economically-valuable fish, now even so-called trash fish are being extirpated, disappearing into civilization's literally insatiable maw.

Another way to put all of this is that any group of beings (human or nonhuman, plant or animal) who take more from their surroundings than they give back will, obviously, deplete their surroundings, after which they will either have to move, or they will dwindle (which, by the way, is a one sentence disproof of the notion that competition drives natural selection: if you hyperexploit your surroundings you will deplete them and die; the only way to survive in the long run is to give back more than you take. Duh).

Our culture—Western Civilization—has been depleting its surroundings for six thousand years, beginning in the Middle East and expanding now to deplete the entire planet. Why else do you think this culture has to continually expand? And why else, coincident with this, do you think it has developed a rhetoric—a series of stories that teach us how to live—making plain not only the necessity but desirability and even morality of continual expansion—causing us to boldly go where no man has gone before—as a premise so fundamental as to become transparent?

Cities, the defining feature of civilization, have always relied on taking resources from the surrounding countryside, meaning, first, that no city has ever been or ever will be sustainable on its own, and second, that in order to continue their ceaseless expansion cities must ceaselessly expand the areas they must ceaselessly hyperexploit: the colonies. I'm sure you can see the problems this presents and the end point it must reach on a finite planet. If you cannot or will not see these problems, then I wish you the best of luck in your career in politics or business. Our studied—to the point of obsessive—avoidance of acknowledging and acting on the surety of this end point is, especially given the consequences, more than passing strange.

Yet another way to say all of this—that our way of living is unsustainable—is to point out that because ultimately the only real source of energy for the planet is the sun (the energy locked in oil, for example, having come from the sun long ago; and I'm excluding nuclear power from consideration here because only a fool would intentionally fabricate and/or refine materials that are deadly poisonous for tens or hundreds of thousands of years, especially to serve the frivolous, banal, and anti-life uses to which we put electricity: think retractable stadium roofs, super-colliders, and aluminum beer cans), any way of being that uses more energy than that currently coming from the

sun will not last, because the noncurrent energy—stored in oil that could be burned, stored in trees that could be burned (stored, for that matter, in human bodies that could be burned)—will in time be used up. As we see.

I am more or less constantly amazed at the number of intelligent and well-meaning people who consistently conjure up magical means to maintain our current disconnected way of living (why we would want to do so is another question: another premise discussed elsewhere is that civilization is not only unsustainable and exploitative but radically undesirable). Just last night I received an email from a very smart woman who wrote, “I don’t think we can go backward. I don’t think Hunter/Gatherer is going to be it. But is it possible to go forward in a way that will bring us around the circle back to sustainability?”

## **Forward without Dysfunction?**

It is a measure of the dysfunction of civilization that no longer do very many people of integrity believe we can or should go forward with it because it serves us well, but rather the most common argument in its favor (and this is true also for many of its particular manifestations, such as the global economy and high technology) seems to be that we’re stuck with it, so we may as well make the best of a very bad situation. “We’re here,” the argument goes, “We’ve lost sustainability and sanity, so now we have no choice but to continue on this self- and other-destructive path.” It’s as though we’ve already boarded the train to Treblinka, so we might as well stay on for the ride. Perhaps by chance or by choice (someone else’s) we’ll somehow end up somewhere besides the gas chambers.

The good news, however, is that we don’t need to go “backward” to anything, because humans and their immediate evolutionary predecessors lived sustainably for at least a million years (cut off the word immediate and we can go back billions). It is not “human nature” to destroy one’s habitat. If it were, we would have done so long before now, and long-since disappeared.

Nor is it the case that stupidity kept (and keeps) non-civilized peoples from ordering their lives in such a manner as to destroy their habitat, nor from developing technologies (for example, oil refineries, electrical grids, and factories) that facilitate this process. Indeed, were we to attempt a cross-cultural comparison of intelligence, maintenance of one’s habitat would seem to me a first-rate measure with which to begin. In any case, when civilized people arrived in North America, the continent was rich with humans and nonhumans alike, living in relative equilibrium and sustainability. I’ve shown this elsewhere, as have many others, most especially the Indians themselves.

Because we as a species haven’t fundamentally changed in the last several thousand years, since well before the dawn of civilization, each new child is still a human being, with the potential to become the sort of adult who can live sustainably on a particular piece of ground, if only the child is allowed to grow up within the context of a culture that values sustainability, that lives by sustainability, that rewards sustainability, that tells itself stories reinforcing sustainability, and strictly disallows the sort of exploitation that would lead to unsustainability. This is natural. This is who we are.

In order to continue moving “forward,” each child must be made to forget what it means to be human and to learn instead what it means to be civilized. As psychiatrist and philosopher RD Laing put it, “From the moment of birth, when the Stone Age baby confronts the twentieth-century mother, the baby is subject to these forces of violence ... as its mother and father, and their parents and their parents before them, have been. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities, and on the whole this enterprise is successful. By the time the new human being is fifteen or so, we are left with a being like ourselves, a half-crazed creature more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age.”

Another problem with the idea that we cannot abandon or eliminate civilization because to do so would be to go backwards is that the idea emerges from a belief that history is natural—like water flowing downhill, like spring following winter—and that social (including technological) “progress” is as inevitable as personal aging. But history is a product of a specific way of looking at the world, a way that is, in fact, influenced by, among other things, environmental degradation.

I used to be offended by the World History classes I took in school, which seemed almost Biblical in the pretension that the world began six thousand years ago. Oh, sure, teachers and writers of books made vague allowances for the Age of the Dinosaurs, and moved quickly—literally in a sentence or two—through the tens or hundreds of

thousands of years of human existence constituting “prehistory” before averting their eyes from such obviously dead subjects.

These few moments were always the briefest prelude to the only human tale that has ever really mattered: Western Civilization. Similarly short shrift was always given to cultures that have existed (or for now still exist) coterminous with Western Civ, as other civilizations such as the Aztec, Incan, Chinese, and so on were given nothing more than a cousinly nod, and ahistorical cultures were mentioned only when it was time for their members to be enslaved or exterminated. It was always clear that the real action started in the Middle East with the “rise” of civilization, shifted its locus to the Mediterranean, to northern and western Europe, sailed across the ocean blue with Christopher Columbus and the boys, and now shimmers between the two towns struck by the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and DC (and to a lesser extent, Tinseltown). Everything, everyone, and everywhere else matters only as it matters to this primary story.

I was bothered not only by the obvious narcissism and arrogance of relegating all of these other stories to the periphery, and by the just-as-obvious stupidity and unsustainability of not making one’s habitat the central figure of one’s stories, but also by the language itself. History, I was told time and again, in classes and in books, began six thousand years ago. Before that, there was no history. It was prehistory. Nothing much happened in this long dark time of people grunting in caves (never mind that extant indigenous languages are often richer, more subtle, more complex than English).

But the truth is that history did begin six thousand years ago. Before then there were personal histories, but there would not have been significant social history of the type we’re used to thinking about, in part because the cultures were cyclical—based on cycles of nature—instead of linear, or based on the changes brought about by this social group on the world surrounding them.

I have to admit that I still don’t like the word prehistory, because it imputes to history an inaccurate inevitability. For the truth is that history didn’t have to happen. I’m not merely saying that any particular history isn’t inevitable, but instead that history itself—the existence of any social history whatsoever—was not always inevitable. It is inevitable for now, but at one point it did not exist, and at some point it will again cease to be.

History is predicated on at least two things, the first physical, the second perceptual. As always, the physical and the perceptual are intertwined. So far as the former, history is marked by change. An individual’s history can be seen as a series of welcomings and leavetakings, a growth in physical stature and abilities followed by a tailing off, a gradual exchange of these abilities for memories, experiences, and, one hopes, wisdom. Fragments of my history. I went to college. I was a high jumper. I remember the eerie, erotic smoothness of laying out over the bar, higher than my head. I lost my springs in my late twenties. I was still a fast runner, chopping the softball toward short and beating out the throw every time. In my thirties arthritis stole my speed, until now I run like a pitching coach, or like an extra in an Akira Kurasawa movie. Twenty years ago I was an engineer. Fifteen years ago a beekeeper. Thirteen years ago I became an environmental activist. Now I’m writing a book about the need to take down civilization. I do not know what my future history will look like.

Social histories are similarly marked by change. The deforestation of the Middle East to build the first cities. The first written laws of civilization, which had to do with the ownership of human and nonhuman slaves. The fabrication of bronze, then iron, the ores mined by slaves, the metals used to conquer. The first empires. Greece and its attempts to take over the world. Rome and its attempts. The conquest of Europe. The conquest of Africa. The conquest of the Americas. The conquest of Australia, India, much of Asia. The deforestation of the planet.

Just as with my own future history, I do not know what the future history of our society will be, nor of the land that lies beneath it. I do not know when the Grand Coulee Dam will come down, nor whether there will still be salmon to recolonize the Upper Columbia. I do not know when the Colorado will again reach the sea, nor do I know whether civilization will collapse before grizzly bears go extinct, or prairie dogs, gorillas, tuna, great white sharks, sea turtles, chimpanzees, orangutans, spotted owls, California red-legged frogs, tiger salamanders, tigers, pandas, koalas, abalones, and millions of others on the brink

The point is that history is marked by change. No change, no history.

## A huge sigh of relief

And some day history will come to an end. When the last bit of iron from the last skyscraper rusts into nothingness, when eventually the earth, and humans on the earth, presuming we still survive, find some sort of new dynamic equilibrium, there will no longer be any history:-

People will live once again in the cycles of the earth, the cycles of the sun and moon, the seasons. And longer cycles, too, of fish who slip into seas then return to rivers full of new life, of insects who sleep for years to awaken on hot summer afternoons, of martens who make massive migrations. once every several human generations, of the rise and fall of populations of snowshoe hare and the lynx who eat them. And longer cycles still, the birth, growth, death, and decay of great trees, the swaying of rivers in their courses, the rise and fall of mountains. All these cycles, these circles great and small.

That's looking at history from an ecological level. From a social or perceptual level, history started when certain groups or classes of people for whatever reason gained the ability to tell the story of what was going on. Monopolizing the story allowed them to set up a worldview to which they could then get other people to subscribe. History is always told by the people in control. The lower classes—and other species—may or may not subscribe to an academic or upper class description of events, but to some degree most of us do buy into it.

And buying into it carries a series of perceptual consequences, not the least of which is the inability to envision living ahistorically, which means living sustainably, because a sustainable way of living would not be marked, obviously, by changes in the larger landscape. Another way to say all of this is that to perceive history as inevitable or natural is to render impossible the belief that we can go “back” to being non-industrialized, indeed non-civilized, and in fact to create the notion that to do either of these is in a larger sense backwards at all. To perceive history as inevitable is to make sustainability impossible. The opposite is true as well.

To the degree that we can liberate ourselves from the historical perspective which holds us captive and fall again into the cyclical patterns that characterize the natural world—including natural human communities—we'll find that the notions of forward and backward will likewise lose their primacy. At that point we will once again simply be living. We will learn to not make those markers on the earth that cause history, markers of environmental degradation, and both we and the rest of the world will at long last be able to heave a huge sigh of relief.

# fifth Estate

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