

Anarchist Golf?

Does the club house sport have hidden ancient origins?

Joseph Winogrand

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On the Anarchist Origins of Golf (Expanded version—MS Word, 110 KB)

Although golf's popularity has waned in recent years, losing millions of players, its abuse of land, water-use and chemicals continues on a mass world-wide scale according to the World Anti-Golf Movement.

The multi-billion dollar industry has introduced an insignificant number of organic courses to address the criticism of golf's horrid impact on the environment, and one can note a degree of panic when larger pizza-sized holes on the greens are being considered to increase its appeal.

Its corporate-sized tournament purses and exorbitant greens fees, its feigned air of exclusivity and aristocracy, are ignored by most people. Corporations always seem to patch things up, as they probably will until twenty billion of us consumers are living in glass bubbles, eating genetically modified foods, breathing purified air and lusting after ever fresher spectacles.

No one knows where the game of golf came from or where the word *golf* came from. For unknown reasons, golf-like farming and foraging words are never considered as clues to golf's puzzle, words revealing a primitive, anarchist world not found in history books. A brief review of these words doesn't tell us so much about the game of golf over the past few centuries as it does about the game the corporations have been playing.

The usual speculative golf etymology (Dutch *kolf*, "club, bat, butt of a rifle"; or possibly Scandinavian and Scots dialect *gowf*, "a blow with the open hand") tells us nothing. When golf first appeared in the written record during the 1400s, it interfered with Sunday archery practices that included commoners, the king's bowmen, or yeomen. The yeomanry were later disarmed by the states that replaced the old kingdoms.

Golf must have had rural origins. As late as 1600, 95 per cent of northern Europeans lived on farms. By 1900 57 percent of Scotland's population, to give an instance, had shifted into towns of 5000 or more. Modern golf appeared congruently with the rapid commercialization of farming and urbanization of the greater population. The possession of a spear or a bow by common people became illegal. Customary hunting became the privilege of the upper classes. The craftsmen who previously made spears and bows continued their work as golf club makers.

The word golf in various spellings referred to little balls of fiber or harvests of fodder or food-floors or food-rooms in Scots, English, Dutch, Frisian, German and the Scandinavian languages. A prehistoric connection between a natural life of farming, tools and weapons and the origins of golf is obvious. With so much circumstantial evidence why is there nothing about this in golf histories? Why this breach of historical consciousness? Why were the customs that became modern golf not recorded by the urban clerks and clerics? We have nothing in northern European literature describing some earlier version of the game. Why? Are the lords of modern golf somehow in denial regarding its peasant origins?

We don't know what really happened. We shifted quickly from a rural and oral culture to something new, something praised and paraded in a literate and selective history written by the urban conquerors. We were corporatized. England's corporatization of Celtic peasants is infamous. It became illegal for Welsh, Scottish or Irish natives to speak their native languages or own land, the penalty for which was death.

English uprisings which challenged the destruction of a commons society included Luddites, early 1800s, Machine-Breakers, late 1700s, Levellers, 1720s, Diggers, 1640s, Kett's Rising, 1540s, Ill Lammas Day, 1520s, Briscoe's Close Rising, 1480s, and Jack Cade's Rebellion, 1450s to name only several in Britain.

By the time Oliver Goldsmith publishes *The Deserted Village* in 1789, most English villages were empty ruins, the countryside "dispopulated." These protests against the Renaissance and its newly-hatched market economy appear concurrently with modern golf in the written record.

Behind the usual sad history is there something more tragic, something unspoken? Was our shift to modernity an under-documented, virtually unrecorded social trauma? Was it on the scale of a social holocaust? For those who lost their farmsteads, had the older customs become unspeakable post-traumatic memories?

Only now, with hyper-urbanization suffocating the planet, are we wondering what happened and what we may have lost. The received history may be worse than a lie, more like a gaping wound. Instead of merely 300 documented peasant rebellions across northern Europe, there may have been thousands of uprisings and skirmishes. Instead of merely 15,000 of Goldsmith's deserted villages, there may have been hundreds of thousands of community tragedies, every one awful and unspeakable.

A rapid commercialization of agriculture took place. Former farmers became farm workers. Commercial landlords now leased their land in lots to managers for agreed terms who in turn employed laborers for limited periods—the predecessors of today's migrant workers. How different their lives were from the primitive farm families who had lived as cohesive units, who had now lost more than an earlier version of farming or, for that matter, an earlier version of a pastime like golf. The question regarding golf's origins is altered at its core: Instead of, "Where did golf come from?" it becomes "Why golf?" We suddenly realize we know very little about what preceded modern urban life.

We begin to see that rather than an ancient golf course, we lost an ancient countryside with its independent food sources and convivialities. We lost our relatively egalitarian and anarchist clans with their enduring relationships. Instead of a primitive form of golf we lost our primitive natural world.

The cudgel, the sling, the bow and arrow, the spear and the golf club share a common identity in having the same makers, in being made from the same materials, and in being used in the same open fields. Golf may be innate to anyone regularly using or inventing tools or hunting devices of notable power or distance. For millennia farmers used slings to hurl small stones or they threw various kinds of sticks weighted at one end. The curved Native American rabbit-stick, sometimes called a rappahannock, is similar to the African knockberry and the Upper Nile trombash and the Australian waddy (Aborigines throw a boomerang and a waddy, interchangeably). The art of casting simple weapons to provide dinner was as familiar to the Englishman or Scotsman as it was to everyone else.

Spear-throwing, especially with the atlatl or spear-throwing stick, closely resembles the swing of the golf club. The atlatl, like the hickory or graphite golf shaft, greatly increases a spear's velocity. An even simpler device is the sling of David and Goliath fame, which uses a whipsnap action to increase the velocity of small items similar to golf balls. José Ortega y Gasset writes in his 1948 *Meditations on Hunting* that as "the atrophy of his instincts increases man grows away from his pristine intimacy with Nature." First, he becomes a shepherd, "semi-stationary," then a farmer. He ceases to be an expert tracker, "he has ceased to be wild, that is, he has lost form as a fieldsman." So, suggests Ortega, the quest of the hunter is to go against history, against civilization, and to return to nature.

English ecologist Paul Kingsnorth writes that when we swing a scythe, we follow the lay of the ground with the curve of the blade and become aware of the keenness of its edge and can hear the birds and see things moving in the grass ahead of us, and everything becomes connected with everything else. This connection with land and plant and animal life is singularly human, self-sufficient, independent, anarchist and environmental.

Ortega says history is always made against the grain of nature, that we need "rest from the enormous discomfort and all-embracing disquiet of history" by returning to nature, a natural instinct that is already "evanescent" in us, that is almost entirely "erased." Without this natural instinct we fall into "those chasms of vital emptiness that are generally called wearisomeness, 'spleen,' boredom." To re-enter nature, to find "immersion in Nature," is achieved by the temporary rehabilitation of "that part of himself that is still an animal."

The attraction of modern golf, rather than its corporate status or superiority, may be that it harbors and activates this instinct. Golfers arm themselves and set out together as small bands in search of small targets. They hush

while one of them takes aim and strikes. They watch the result in mutual awe or dismay. They experience together the rapture of a good shot finding its mark. They celebrate and feast afterwards.

Perhaps golfers wish it were real, rather than a hollow masquerade or counterfeit. Modern golf is hollow because a holocaust took its true conviviality from us; an unspoken worldwide environmental holocaust defined by the eradication of small-scale farmers and foragers who lived in an environment that was greatly *wild*, that is, natural.

It is a holocaust not simply because of the blight upon the landscape that is roads, cities, chemicals, industry and overpopulation, but because its landscape is hollow without relatively *wild* people, without families in nature who raise and care for local plants and animals, or gather them from the wild. This is the *Practice of the Wild*, as Gary Snyder's book is titled.

Only being prehistoric, Ortega believed, allows us to be in the country:

"I mean within a countryside which, moreover is authentically countryside...[where] the air has another, more exquisite feel as it glides over the skin or enters the lungs, the rocks acquire a more expressive physiognomy, and the vegetation becomes loaded with meaning."

Joseph Winogrand is a folklorist whose research concerns primitive life and the eradication of self-subsistent small communities by corporatism. Originally from the Midwest, he is a guitarist and folksinger and has been singing folk songs from the Celtic and English traditions since the early 1960s.

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