

Live TV or Die

Primitivism on TV!

Andrew William Smith

2015

a review of

Live Free or Die. National Geographic Cable Channel

While I love the peace and challenges of backwoods camping, I admit that I don't engage with them that often, and when I have, the thin lines between adventure and annoyance, between serenity and boredom, barely exist.

If you want to see a person with an intellectual critique of civilization get infatuated with civilization's creature comforts, watch their most intimate reactions to home-cooked meals and hot showers after a few days or even weeks roughing it in the woods.

The rewilding movement which has developed primitive survival skills into an artful science and has some popularity and support among green anarchists, anarcho-primitivists, and doomsday collapsists—is the topic of a new reality program on the National Geographic Channel.

The show's title, "Live Free or Die," copies the official New Hampshire state motto, but also sounds reminiscent of the name of an old Earth First! newsprint zine from the 80s and 90s—*Live Wild or Die*.

Upon first learning of the show, I romantically recalled those friends and comrades I've met over the years who have learned similar skills. I can hike, pitch a tent, filter water, forage very little. Building shelters with primitive tools and hunting prey that I could prepare into an edible meal are beyond my meager survival skills.

Watching the show's dreadlocked hunter-gatherers do their thing cultivated more of my admiration than it held my attention. Now, I'm going to kill a rat. Now, I'm going to eat a rat. Yum.

In addition to nomadic hunters, the program also features quasi-primitive homesteaders. The intricacies of living a somewhat settled sedentary existence without making much of an impact, without buying food at the store or having a well or spring for water, these are perhaps more painful to witness as a TV consumer than to practice. While the rugged rejection and spartan survivalism of the nomadic hunter portrayed here make some sense to me sociologically and psychologically, I found peering into the lives of the homesteaders painful. The enterprise appears haphazard and tedious at best, with the boundaries of being sedentary strong, but with none of the benefits of modern living to help beat the boredom. As a former homesteader, I feel their pain.

For the subjects of the show, or stars, if you will, rewilding is presented as an all-encompassing lifestyle and not just a hobby, avocation, or skillshare for the future collapse. Admittedly, I only checked out a handful of episodes and browsed the program's website, but in this perusal, I got no sense of these individuals feeling connected to larger ideas or any motivating genius as felt in the writings of the primitivist philosophers. Thus, the absence of any ideology or philosophy being portrayed in the short interview segments shocked me. However, after only a few minutes of viewing, I "got" the point of the whole program and had to force myself to stick with the storylines of these pioneers for a full 60-minute encounter.

My initial impressions of the rewilding movement—whether among friends practicing it or in the anti-authoritarian or deep green media—always included a more-than-implied critique. That is, the people who learned

such skills and practiced such lifestyles did so out of a profound personal commitment and worldview concerning the imminent collapse of industrial society and the moral failures of human communities to create sustainable, ethical relationships. For the average viewers of “Live Free Or Die,” it would be possible to view rewilding merely as a romantic fancy, a privatistic piety, and oddball fetish.

At least among urban deep ecologists, the many movements for greening, gardening, and land reclamation carry with them a commitment to, and engagement with, everyday life in community and experiments in horizontal social structures.

As I survey the array of National Geographic programs, rugged primitives have their fair share of the spotlight, along with monsters and UFOs. During my days as a “lifestyle anarchist” (as the late Murray Bookchin contemptuously labeled primitivists and homesteaders), I took pains to playfully talk back to the sober assessments we often heard from our more conservative (at least in terms of lifestyle) elders and peers.

Now that I am older and more conservative (a strange but handy term to deploy in this context), I confess, I at least now comprehend what the so-called “social anarchists” (the class struggle guys in Bookchin’s language) were so upset about. One could say that this former lifestyle liberationist is now more of a collectivist comrade.

For individualist rewilding, I found the recent film, “Wild,” starring Reese Witherspoon and based on Cheryl Strayed’s memoir of a woman’s 1100-mile solo hike to be a narrative of much more integrity than anything I could glean from this reality program.

As far as I can discern in hindsight, for the social anarchist, it’s all about us. For the lifestyle anarchist, it’s all about me. As television, “Live Free or Die” embodies a spooky media fascination with individualistic rebellion and privatized primitivism. Collective liberation isn’t even on the cable menu, no matter how many channels we get.

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