

Life & Rewilding in the Pandemic

Steve Kirk

2020

“Sridevi and her relatives collected nine types of *Dioscorea* tubers; some extended deep underground. The ease and flow of the work, and the general lack of rules governing the way spouses cooperated in doing this job, struck me.”

—Nurit Bird-David, *Us, Relatives: Scaling and Plural Life in a Forager World*

Recently my sister contacted me and shared stories of her new life in quarantine. In a small pocket of the West Virginia Potomac Highlands, daily foraging trips have become the norm. There are two of them in a tiny home, a few hundred yards from a shallow river and only a few feet from lush patches of morels and winecaps. They track the sandy soil of the riverbanks and concoct plans for traps. They barter for a bow and arrows.

It is deeply telling of our moment that such stark contrast has emerged. The unemployed foragers discover life in vibrant plenty while the terms of our social contract are made more and more explicit. Apps to track unemployed workers who don't return to work. Penalties on unemployment insurance for those who fear return to the foam-insulated death-boxes of efficiency where climate control incubates the virus in exponential fashion, an obvious yet twisted reality. The paradigm of the warehouse, the slaughterhouse, the crammed office—the hallmarks of industrial civilization. These are the festering wounds where this plague broods and multiplies, and this is where the pitiless fools usher us to return.

However, many have never left their jobs. At a time when large portions of the population no longer relates to clock time, many others are bound to it more than ever. The fear of temporary stimulus fading quickly keep workers bound to their daily tasks.

What is it that anarchists have to offer? Not just in direct and immediate aid, as important as that is right now, but beyond and in this moment? The choices for our future have been laid before us in media narrative: hyper-surveillance state or conspiratorial denial. There must be a choice to reject the paradigm of mass disease, of mass society. The totality pretends solutions, proffering forecasts and statistical models which crumble daily.

Our political faith in scientific solutionism reproduces its own confirmation while each towering failure is chalked up to a confession of inadequacy: a model is only as good as its assumptions. We put faith in siloed experts running denatured death and loss converted to sterile data. Perhaps the most tragic assumption is that the totality of technological civilization can prevail. But still we track the data and wait for clues and signs in the field of rising numbers, hoping that some stupidly clear choice confronts me with its obviousness. There is no path for me but to walk away from the writhing leviathan and tempt the possibility of anarchy.

A friend traversing the Midwest and Rockies on a tumultuous personal saga details his new unemployed coronavirus life in particularity. The removal of the backstrap, the separation of spoiled flesh—the bounty of the roadkill dinner. He is quick to identify this new but old way of life: hunter-scavenger. We talk plans that would read like fantasy last year. Nomadic hunters stalking feral cattle. Ranchers will hunker down; the anarchist hunter will move and disperse. This is the talk of a time unlike any we've known.

This crisis towers above and in and throughout a regime which preaches ease and convenience. The panoply of physical choice rests just outside, in what is now a spot vanquished to the images of plague. Home delivery takes precedent as the clock ticks on monetary manipulation.

Will we continue to cling until the end? Will the species bleed dry every logistically feasible scenario to facilitate consumption and production? This crisis weaves with all others. Hurricane season. Burn season. Ice melt season. The hydrocarbon-fueled seasons of doom which preceded and wrote the prologue to our current moment.

Beyond that, hundreds and thousands and millions of tragedies, tales of destruction boiled down to such ineffectual encapsulations as biodiversity loss.

We must stay shut down. The virus is a symptom of the rotting totality and unless it is treated as such, the options ahead look like crumbling states clutching harder and harder to the edge of the cliff, or ascendant political movements fighting for a chance to steer the death ship.

Many say we are out of time. We've been out of time for generations. The fact that we are out of time is not a call for despair, but a call for action. Anarchists have the capacity to seize this moment, to build paths through the world that traverse new and old boundaries of subsistence and community. In doing so, we might discover ways to undermine the ruling paradigm, to establish a baseline for health that transcends and contradicts this swarming nightmare.

On a hike with friends last year, we traveled to the top of a nearby mountain in West Virginia and pitched our hammocks for the night. It was dry for weeks before and the hint of rainfall in the higher elevations that evening gave no relief. As we made our way down the remaining 12 miles, we found all the streams and springs dry.

We traveled thirsty and hungry until a patch of autumn olives planted for game management came into view. We gorged ourselves on each one, trying each bush, carefully comparing the subtle difference in taste and sweetness. We settled on one near the center whose taste was sweet like candy. A simple and dishonest comparison that felt abundantly true.

The group traveled in jubilation, but with both thirst and hunger finding us once again near the end of our trip. An overgrown orchard peeks through a fence and we scramble for the fallen Asian pears, devouring them in a manner of honest appreciation and once again extolling the virtuous delectability of this food which never had the horrid chance to be converted to property.

As the pandemic distorts conventional relationships of supply and production, a subsistence outside of property calls more loudly than ever. Let us hear this call and return to a paradigm characterized only by breathing, pulsing anarchic life.

There is much work to do, each day is a chance to start.

Steve Kirk is an anarcho-primitivist author and musician. He is an editor at *Oak: A Journal Against Civilization*, where the second issue is in preparation. **Oakjournal.org**.



Steve Kirk
Life & Rewilding in the Pandemic
2020

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/407-fall-2020/life-rewilding-in-the-pandemic>
Fifth Estate #407, Fall, 2020

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net