Anarchism and Agriculture

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For the Father of Agriculture
Gave us a hard calling: he first decreed it an art
To work the fields, sent worries to sharpen our mortal wits
And would not allow his realm to grow listless from lethargy.
Before Jove's time no settlers brought the land under subjection;
Not lawful even to divide the plain with land marks and boundaries:
All produce went to a common pool, and earth unprompted
Was free with all her fruits.
—THE GEORGICS OF VIRGIL, trans. C. Day Lewis

IF IT HAS ANY MEANING, anarchism is a concept which is accepted because it is more in line with human aspirations than an authoritarian governmental social structure, that is, a concept that will serve man's future as a part of the ecological structure of organic life on the earth. Man must take a shorter look at what is above his head and a longer and deeper look at what is immediately beneath his feet, and I do not mean the tin of his automobile, or the concrete of his cities. The first essential for a stable civilisation is a stable, non-exploitive agriculture, an agriculture which not only nourishes a community of men, but will continue to do so indefinitely. Unless this is achieved, industrialism and its techniques will merely be illusions which, if they do not achieve the total demise of life on this planet through modern warfare, will achieve the same end by starvation.

To the anarchist who is concerned with anarchism as a viable way of life, and not as a mere act of personal rebellion, *Mutual Aid* by Kropotkin and *Soil and Civilisation* by Edward Hyams, make essential reading. These two men are concerned with man as part, not only of a community of men, but also of a community of the soil and plant and animal life. Living in vast cities where the shops are bulging with food, and in Europe where climatic conditions are favourable and where the soil has been stabilised by years of a comparatively workable husbandry which stands a lot of abuse without ill effects being immediately apparent, it is hard to believe that the soil community of which we are members is so precarious. The history of agriculture makes interesting reading, so does its relationship with peace, aggression and the decline and fall of civilisation. The ease with which soil fertility, the only real source of capital, is used up by the manipulation of power and the waste of war, the speed at which even civilisations with far less power than we have

at our disposal, dissipated the laborious toil of man and nature, should be a salutary lesson to those who think in terms of what Edward Hyams calls a "high civilisation" without reference to a basically workable agriculture. With modern techniques the Americans produced a dust bowl in half a decade. The Romans with slave manpower took longer. Both have an exploitive attitude to our natural environment and to mankind.

The modern industrial commercial state imposes on the farming community conditions which will cause the decay of much of the land now in production. Of course the blind forces of commodity production may reverse the process, but often what is quickly done is not soonest mended. It seems to me that when considering a social organisation we have primarily to consider it in relation to agriculture. We also have to consider a world population growing more rapidly than ever before, to be fed, at the moment, on diminishing areas of land of diminishing fertility. There has to be a dramatic change in people's attitudes, a change which could deal with both these threats to our continued existence on earth.

The anarchist is opposed to the manipulation and exploitation of man by man, he has a concept of man as belonging to one family. This must be carried further to a concept of man as part of an ecological system. A pragmatic approach, free from religious, political and commercial ideologies and from short-term sectional interests is the only one which will create a series of workable soil-communities on earth. It is as well here to define what a soil is: a soil becomes a soil when it contains sufficient organic residues to support soil micro-organisms and the larger forms of plant and animal life. The type of life it supports is controlled and modified by moisture and temperature, and, in nature, residues both plant and animal, slowly build up this organic content, known as humus. As it builds up this in turn also has an effect on the temperature and humidity.

Man as hunter and food gatherer is an integral part of this community and is also subject to the natural checks that prevent one species from dominating another. Man as a primitive agriculturalist and herds-man soon found that his activities in taking crops exhaust the soil, and moved on, allowing the vigour of the surroundings to replenish the area. In effect, organic growth is composed first of the mineral of the rock, air and water, and the energy of the sun; the larger and more complex organisms requiring a mixture of these plus humus and the enormously complicated soil population that teems beneath the sod. Therefore before man could achieve a settled habitat where he could develop, there had to be an agricultural system that replenished the organic content. Where this system failed, the civilisation became aggressive and decayed, or both. It should be noted that tillage systems exhaust soils more rapidly than pastoral systems which often do not disturb the existing ecological arrangement.

Practically the only area in the world in which the soil is self-renewing other than by a system of rational agriculture is the Nile valleys where for thousands of years the Nile has brought soil from Abyssinia and the upper reaches, and annually flooded, refertilising the land with fresh soil. This is the exception; to crop land in all other circumstances impoverishes it, more or less according to climatic conditions. So a workable system of manuring must be created so that the humus content is maintained and if possible increased.

What have been the most successful agricultural systems in the terms we have described? According to Edward Hyams, "The two tried methods of land holding which entail soil conservation and improvement are those of medium freehold combined with high farming, such as the English system of the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries; and the national land ownership with strict laws of soil management, such as the Incarial system of ancient Peru." He goes on, "Probably the

soundest farmers in Russia were the monks, and as the monasteries owned up to one third of all the land the damage done by bad soil management was reduced or at least slowed considerably."

Hyams also states that "Agricultural slavery leads inevitably to abuse of soil: the actual labourers on the land have little or no interest in its condition, while its owners look upon it merely as a source of personal not communal wealth." I would go further and say that wage slavery, interest and commerce accelerates abuse of the soil, perpetuates a divided community of privileged and underprivileged, divides a huge insecure industrial proletariat from the source of its life and debases values. Agriculture is too serious a matter to leave in the hands of politicians, industrialists and profiteers, and the soil heritage left from the depredation of militarism, ignorance and greed, is too precious to be squandered by the wastefulness of a consumer society. At the moment the agricultural system that provided the initial surplus value that was the basis of the industrial revolution is being refashioned to commercial needs and on the pattern of modern industrial production. It is, in Hyams' expression, ceasing to be soil-making agriculture and is becoming a soil-consuming agriculture.

It is perhaps significant that ANARCHY will have passed its third birthday before the problem of agriculture is discussed, and yet in any society its needs must be paramount in the organisation of society. The anarchist movement has probably been too much influenced by the concepts of progress in modern industrial society, and by the Marxian idea of surplus value, most of which is being flushed down the lavatory as paper, faeces and urine.

An anarchist society would, I hope, start by asking the right questions: does it feed? Will it continue to feed? Will it sustain a vigorous and healthy society? The question: "Does it pay?" except from the ecological point of view, would be dropped from the vocabulary. Exploitation and parasitism would have to cease in relation to the soil, as with man and man. Techniques of farming would have to suit climate and situations and machines devised to help with the conservation of soils. Countries where the soil is seriously eroded would be assisted with reafforestation and irrigation and supplied with other sources of heat and power so that dung is not burnt and hillsides denuded of their cover.

In fact an anarchist programme would be to push out the frontier of viable agriculture. As I see it the type of agriculture to do all that is needed of it, would be one based on relatively small groups, where consumers and producers are closely connected and where all members of the community whether artisans or agriculturalists take a lively and vital interest in the soil that gives them life. Significantly Kropotkin puts the Fields first in his pamphlet on *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. The vast exchange of foodstuffs cannot continue without some sort of parasitism, basically the community of a soil must be maintained by an exchange of organic matter between consumers and soil.

The soil must be regarded as a community asset that no individual has the right to destroy. The pressure on the food sources of any part of the world must be recognised as a threat to the stability of the world population, and a non-commercial food policy would enable technical and physical assistance before the irrevocable steps towards total soil destruction are taken.

If history teaches us nothing else, it teaches us that progress is not an inevitable march forward: it is a history of civilisations buried in the dust of destroyed soils. Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* proposes the theory of a partnership, whereas other political and social ideas think in terms of power and exploitation. The first concept is the only one with a future. There must be a partnership of artisans and peasants in groups small enough to control both their social and biological

relationships so that there is a reality of values, the peasant to conserve what is necessary to conserve, the artisan to create what is necessary to create to prevent stagnation.

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As in all forms of capitalist production, price and profit are the main motivation for agricultural production. There is however a recognition that such blind forces cannot be altogether the deciding factor in this important field of human activity, hence nearly every country uses some sort of support system. There are many small farmers whose hourly rate of pay probably comes to less than an employed agricultural worker's rate, but who still prefer this life to any other; they are steadily declining in numbers. Quality, unless it has an immediate and decisive effect on profit, takes second place to quantity. Food is subject to processes which are concerned with it as a commodity and not as a means of nutrition. A life assurance firm would testify that quantity has little to do with quality.

While most of the official purveyors of agricultural knowledge are concerned with reducing costs and streamlining production, the tendency is to forget that food is primarily an essential necessity for living things. The only organisation in Britain which starts from this position is the Soil Association. Their contention that the organic content of the soil is necessary for high fertility is not now disputed. A leaflet published by the United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service (No. 328) states that owing to 20 per cent to 50 per cent loss of organic matter, land is now harder to farm. In Britain, with a long tradition of mixed farming and rotation crops, it has taken longer for the effects of such large-scale operations to have an effect. Even here in some of our best land the loss of humus in the fens has been terrific and now farmers are finding that disease and difficulties in cultivation are making crop yields decline.

In the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* (27.8.1963) a correspondent asks: "Just how far can we go with this continuous corn-growing lark? Make no mistake, the writing is on the wall this year, and the answer which it gives to most people is: Not very far." Addressing the zoology section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science last year. Dr. F. Fraser Darling said, "The immense buffer and reservoir of the wilderness has shrunk in area and influence. Quite suddenly in these past twenty-five years and particularly since the last war, there has been a shaking of confidence. The all-conquering technological man whose mind has the same characteristics as the bulldozers employed to grow groundnuts on a prodigious scale in Tanganyika, is already out of date, although the breed is highly inventive and has in no way accepted defeat."

As in other fields it is the minorities and so-called cranks who see the dangers produced by the scrabble for money and power. To some extent in recent years the dangers of certain agricultural practices have been brought to the notice of the general public. The danger is that a lot of harm can be done in circumstances where our knowledge is limited, and the pressure to adopt methods that reduce costs and increase profit without the proper investigation of the long-term effects is overwhelming. The organic school contend, and their experiments tend to indicate, that artificials used, even in conjunction with farmyard manure (and only 8 per cent of our crops receive an application of it) produce certain changes in the crops.

For a long time a very careful experiment has been carried out at Haughley, Suffolk, details of which can be obtained from the Soil Association, from which it can be seen that infinite pains have been taken with limited resources to rule out other variables. Here a herd of cows has consistently yielded more and in some respects better milk on less food, on an organic run part of the farm, than a similar herd of the same genetic background on the part of the farm run with the use of chemical fertilisers. The Association contends that artificials, which can be defined as

a selection of highly-soluble chemicals, Nitrogen, Phosphate, Potash, that are known to have a stimulating effect on plant growth, do two things. They tend by the nature of their solubility to saturate the soil solution and exclude necessary trace elements so that the plant food is unbalanced. They accelerate the rate at which the humus in the soil is used particularly where this is the only means of fertilisation. It is also believed that they discourage soil organisms which break down organic matter and provide plant food. Eve Balfour in *The Living Soil* writes, "It is believed that the health of man, beast, plant and soil is one indivisible whole; that the health of the soil depends on maintaining its biological balance, and that starting with a truly fertile soil, the crops grown on it, the livestock fed on those crops, and the humans fed on both have a standard of health and a power of resisting disease and infection, from whatever cause, greatly in advance of anything ordinarily found in this country; such health as we have almost forgotten should be our natural state, so used have we become to subnormal physical fitness."

Whether or not artificial fertilisers can be used without ill effects must be a subject of much more investigation; it is certain that the manufacturers will not institute an investigation in the absence of positive proof: that might put them out of business. When large vested interests scoff at the idea that their products may have a harmful effect the need for independent research is paramount. One only gets the right answers if one asks the right questions. (What has been an immense source of profit for the tobacco companies, has been a loss to the community.) What is certain is that there is a lot of disease associated with mineral disturbances in cattle and a tremendous wastage through infertility, and now we find that animals are beginning. to get nitrate poisoning. Andre Vosin, who is a farmer and a biochemist, advocates the judicious use of basic fertilisers and a system of rational grazing, and reckons that productivity of grassland can be raised well above arable levels by an ecological approach. In a recent work called Soil, Grass and Cancer he contends that the health of animals and men is linked to the mineral balance of the soil.

The criteria for a successful agriculture must be the production of a balanced diet for every human being, a healthy and vigorous humanity, and soil that is maintained and improved in fertility by the farming practice. Food must be removed from the category of a commodity. With great technological advances we tend to forget the basis of our life and the precariousness of that basis. As Sir George Stapleton said in The Land, Now and Tomorrow: "I am sure that if man looked at himself biologically, he would realise that, evolve as he may, he can never hope to be in a perfect state of equilibrium with his environment unless that environment satisfies his organism as a whole, and unless man lives in a state of equilibrium with his environment, then man himself cannot be whole, inevitably. he will be unbalanced. We have evolved, not from a chemical retort, not from a laboratory or technical process and not under the atmospheric and psychological influences of great cities, nor has homo sapiens been weaned on a diet of processed foods."

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