

Comments on John Zerzan's Critique of Agriculture

Bob Brubaker

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[Fifth Estate note] John Zerzan's essay, "Agriculture: Essence of Civilization," appeared in FE #329, Summer 1988 and is available for one dollar from 4632 Second Ave., Detroit, MI 48201. It is also part of a collection of John's essays entitled *Elements of Refusal* and can be obtained through our book service for \$9.00.

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Is agriculture the ultimate source of alienation? John Zerzan answers this question with an emphatic "yes" (see "Agriculture, Essence of Civilization," Summer 1988 FE). Arguing that agriculture is "the embodiment and generator of separated life," he concludes that "liberation is impossible without its dissolution."

John bases this sober judgment on several distinct but related factors. He charges among other things that 1) agriculture is the will to power over nature, the materialization of alienated humanity's desire to subdue and control the natural world; 2) agriculture inevitably destroys the balance of nature, leaving biological degradation and ecological ruin in its wake; 3) agriculture is "the beginning of work and production," generating an increasingly standardized, confined and repressive culture; and 4) agriculture leads inevitably to the rise of civilization.

If true, John's allegations would have far-reaching implications for the radical ecology movement. Ecological theory would have to be substantially revised, and the long-sought goal of creating agriculture-based eco-communities abandoned. Indeed, the very notion of a sustainable "agro-ecology" would have to be seen as a cruel joke, yet another instance of the radical left's inability to envision a truly revolutionary alternative.

Before they abandon their convictions and head for the hills, however, radical ecologists should take a closer look at John's argument; it is, I'm convinced, deeply flawed in several respects. I'd like to focus on allegations 1) and 2) since they pose the greatest challenge to conventional ecological wisdom. But I'll also touch briefly on allegations 3) and 4) during the course of the discussion, before concluding with a comment on the ominous implications of a blanket condemnation of agriculture.

The common thread running throughout John's argument is his conviction that agriculture is a totality, a *weltanschauung* that shapes every aspect of social and cultural life. Moreover, agriculture's power to determine social facts is no less true at the beginning than at later stages

of agricultural development. And because agriculture is a totality, the rise of civilization was virtually assured once farming replaced hunting and gathering as the dominant mode of human existence.

The emergence of civilization “was dictated by agriculture,” John asserts, for the simple reason that agriculture already is, in all its essential attributes, the beginning of civilization. There are, according to him, virtually no important distinctions to be found among primitive farming communities, early agricultural civilizations, and the modern agricultural-industrial state. The digging stick and the tractor; the tiny garden plots of the Trobriand Islanders and the vast, slave-worked plantations of the Roman Empire; Hopi maize cultivation and U.S. agribusiness, are all elements of a single, linear process of socio-historical development—just a series of points spanning the growth curve of civilization.

There is, however, a serious problem with this model of agricultural continuity: it is based on a complete misreading of primitive society. Symbolism, not agriculture, was the sun around which primitive life revolved. Every institution in primitive society—including farming, hunting, myth, ritual, celebration, kinship, and friendship—was structured in accordance with a social logic based on norms of sharing, reciprocity and gift exchange.

This symbolic exchange, as it has been termed, wasn’t merely one aspect among others in the primitive order. On the contrary, “primitive ‘society’ does not exist as a separate instance apart from symbolic exchange....For the primitives, eating, drinking and living are first of all acts that are exchanged: if they are not exchanged, they do not occur.” (Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 1975, pp. 78-9)

Symbolism was at once the ordering principle of primitive society and its means of interpreting the world. In the primitive symbolic order, nature was perceived as an integral part of society, not as something separate; at the same time, society was seen as existing within the natural world. Primitive symbolism truly was “the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity.” And it was also profoundly ecological in that it recognized, intuitively and experientially, the mutual interdependence of all life. That primitive society’s insights into nature were couched in spiritual terms shouldn’t blind us to their profundity or significance.

Once we understand that primitive society was a symbolic order, we can readily see the deep inadequacy of John’s interpretational categories. Take, for instance, his designation of primitive horticulture as “food production.” John means more by this term than the simple observation that primitive people grew food: he means that food growing was a systematic operation whose aim was to exploit nature and human labor to produce a commodity: the beginning of work and production, where nature enters into the era of its domination.

But primitive agriculture wasn’t at all a rationalist project. Production, after all, is based on an objective attitude toward nature, its reduction to raw materials and resources for human use. Production also involves rational calculations of utility, efficiency, allocation of resources, and so on. But none of these objective characteristics are germane to primitive farming. Tribal societies didn’t usually attempt to systematize food “production” to achieve greater productivity or produce a surplus; as Marshall Sahlins and others have shown, the domestic “economy” always operates beneath its potential.

Furthermore, primitive people often grew food for purposes apart from nutrition. Dorothy Lee observed that Trobriand Islanders would grow yams (called taytu) to give as gifts: ideally, the taytu would rot uneaten in the yam house of the recipient. Lee notes that “it fills the owners

with nausea at the thought of eating the taytu; it gives them, instead, an urge to go to the bush and eat what grows there.” This keeps the taytu free of purpose: ideally, they are not food.

Lee goes on to remark that most of the gift taytu are eaten eventually, “but only incidentally”; their main function was to serve as gifts “in a system of free giving without what we call ulterior motives, not for altruism, not in barter or exchange for”; such yams had “a very important place in the everyday, as well as the ceremonial, life of the people.” (*Freedom and Culture*, 1959, pp. 96-7)

None of the objective, rationalist, purposive or exploitative characteristics typical of a system of production were present in primitive agriculture. This agriculture served only one purpose: to seal the relationship among individual members of society, and between society and nature.

As Jean Baudrillard observes in *The Mirror of Production*: “Primitive man does not chop one tree or trace one furrow without ‘appeasing the spirits’ with a counter-gift or sacrifice. This taking and returning, giving and receiving, is essential. It is always an actualization of symbolic exchange with gods. The final product is never aimed for. There is neither behavior aiming to produce useful values for the group through technical means, nor behavior aiming at the same end by magical means.” This is why, he continues, there is really no scarcity in primitive society. “Scarcity only exists in our own linear perspective of the accumulation of goods. Here it suffices that the cycle of gifts and counter-gifts is not interrupted.” (pp. 82-3)

John’s failure to take this symbolic exchange into account colors virtually all his observations about primitive agriculture. John describes agriculture as the will to power over nature, the materializing of a malevolent desire to subjugate the land and turn plants and animals into “mere things to be manipulated.”

This is alleged to be true of all agriculture, without exception. One would expect to find, then, primitive farmers exhibiting hostile or aggressive attitudes toward nature, or at the very least treating it “objectively,” as mere matter to be manipulated according to human desires. But if anything, it was the opposite: primitive people had an intensely cooperative, subjective, social relationship with nature.

Consider, for example, Dorothy Lee’s description of Hopi maize cultivation in *Freedom and Culture*:

“The Hopi Talayesua, describing his work on the land, does not see himself in opposition to it. He works with the elements, not against them. He helps the corn to grow; he cooperates with the thunderstorm and the pollen and the sun. He is in harmony with the elements, not in conflict; and he does not set out to conquer an opponent.”

As Murray Bookchin astutely remarks in *The Ecology of Freedom*, in primitive society nature “enters directly into consociation with humanity—not merely harmonization or even balance...Ecological ceremonials validate the ‘citizenship’ nature acquires as part of the human environment.”

“In primitive society,” Bookchin continues, “nature and humanity form an organic unity in an ontological sense that the protoplasm of humankind renature in the process of being kin is circulated by distinct acts of the community: ceremonials, dances, dramas, songs, decorations and symbols.” (pp. 47-8)

John would probably reply that the distinction between symbolic interaction with domesticated plants and animals and the naked exploitation of them is too slight to matter. He argues that domestication of any kind is indefensible because it robs creatures of their freedom and corrupts their biological potential. But this position strikes me as totally arbitrary. It seems more

appropriate to view domestication, on the small scale practiced by tribal society, as simply a variant of predation: a way to participate in the “shimmering food-chain, food web” (Gary Snyder) of which we are all—human and non-human alike—an integral part.

John’s hostility to primitive domestication, as well as primitive agriculture in general, lacks proportion. The Hopis, after all, didn’t attempt to unilaterally impose a human design on nature. Their interventions in pristine nature were modest endeavors, interactions with the ecosystem rather than total disruptions of it. The Hopis didn’t clearcut the forests, dam the rivers or hunt game to extinction. Hopi villages weren’t carved out of the wilderness, as civilization’s towns and cities are, but existed within it; and the Hopi people regularly ventured away from their settlements into remote areas to interrelate with nature and find spiritual instruction there. To see in all this anything analogous to civilization’s systematic effacement of wild, untamed nature, is to distort and exaggerate to the point of utter falsification.

In alleging that agricultural societies “inevitably ruin their environments,” John ignores one of the most important aspects of the symbolic structure of primitive society. John posits a direct link between agricultural settlements, the rise of private property, the growth of cities and the rise of civilization—a continuous development which resulted in widespread ecological destruction in the regions where the first civilizations arose.

But this scenario completely ignores the fact that most tribal cultures were stable, not expansionist in nature, and this fact bears a direct relationship to their impact on the environment. Most tribal societies didn’t exterminate their neighbors, enslave whole populations, or seize their territory. Wars between neighboring communities were limited in objective and duration, more like clan rivalries, or even sporting events, than modern warfare (for this reason, some anthropologists have refused to use the term “warfare” to describe these primitive conflicts).

Most primitive people sought to achieve peaceful and cooperative relationships with their neighbors—also in accordance with the norms of symbolic exchange and reciprocity that shaped relationships within the tribe (as Dorothy Lee pointed out in *Freedom and Culture*, trade between neighboring tribes was generally structured as a gift relationship, not as simple barter based on objective criteria of economic equivalence)—and this cooperative endeavor had important ecological consequences.

Ecologist Ray Dasmann has characterized primitive societies as “ecosystem-based cultures.” Summarizing Dasmann’s argument, Gary Snyder has written that these are cultures “whose life and economies are centered in terms of natural regions and watersheds.” Snyder notes that with the decline of the last Ice Age and the consequent demise of big game hunting, “a fairly nomadic grassland-and-tundra hunting life” gave way to a more settled existence.

As a result, “Countless local ecosystem habitation styles emerged. People developed specific ways to be in each of those niches: plant knowledge, boats, dogs, traps, nets, fishing—the smaller animals, the smaller tools. From steep jungle slopes of Southwest China to coral atolls to barren arctic deserts—a spirit of what it was to be there evolved that spoke of a direct sense of relation to the ‘land’—which really means, the totality of the local bio-region system, from cirrus clouds to leaf mold.” (*The Old Ways*, pp. 60, 59)

Dasmann contrasts these ecosystem-based cultures with what he calls “biosphere cultures,” meaning (to quote again from Snyder’s summary) “those who discovered—seven or eight thousand years ago in a few corners of the globe—that it was ‘profitable’ to spill over into another drainage, another watershed, another people’s territory, and steal away its resources, natural and human.”

While ecosystem-based cultures usually sought to maintain a mutually-sustaining relationship with their local environments, biosphere cultures could afford to wreck a local habitat and then move on to exploit the next. “Thus the Roman Empire would strip whole provinces for the benefit of the capital, and villa-owning Roman aristocrats would have huge slave-operated farms in the south using giant wheeled plows. Southern Italy never recovered. We know the term ‘imperialism’—Dasmann’s ‘biosphere cultures’ adds to that, helps us realize that biological exploitation is a critical part of it too—the species made extinct. The clearcut forests.” (*The Old Ways*, p. 61)

It is telling that John’s examples of ecologically-destructive agriculture are taken mostly from the annals of early agricultural civilizations. It is, of course, well-known that these civilizations—with their concentrated populations, spreading urbanization, intensive farming methods, and frequent warfare and plunder—mostly decimated their environments. But for every example of an Attica “wasted by disease,” one can also point to a tropical island, a lowland river valley, or a mountain slope where tribal agriculturists—gardeners is a better word—apparently achieved a harmonious balance with the natural world.

Agricultural peoples had been living in North America for thousands of years prior to the European invasion, yet there isn’t any evidence that these tribes had ruined (or were ruining) their environments. On the contrary, the still-extensive wilderness and fantastic abundance of wildlife that so awed the first European explorers suggest that tribal farming had an essentially benign impact on the ecology of the North American continent. Destruction of the continental ecosystem commenced when the first wave of settlers from the expansionist, nature-hating “biosphere cultures” of Europe landed on North American shores.

By the 1820s, a mere two hundred years later, these settlers had seized millions of square miles of land, cleared billions of acres of forest, exterminated countless bears, deer, wolves, mountain lions, birds and other animals, and killed or displaced almost all the indigenous people east of the Mississippi. To imply that this vast destruction was caused by agriculture per se—and not the more complex phenomenon of biospheric imperialism—not only oversimplifies the causes of ecological destruction, but subtly demeans the tribal peoples who resisted this onslaught, many of whom were farmers themselves.

Destruction of the planetary ecosystem isn’t simply a function of agricultural activity as such, but rather of the relationship between agriculture and social life. And where there is symbolic interaction with nature, ecological destruction doesn’t take place. The settlers who clearcut forests, slaughtered wildlife, and exterminated native Americans didn’t do so out of a simple desire to farm the land, but out of a desire, finally, to obliterate the wilderness completely and with it their deep ambivalence about everything that was still wild and free.

These settlers had in fact lost touch with that part of themselves that the wilderness represented. And the human inhabitants of that wilderness—some of them farmers, others fishermen, still others hunters—they too had to be eliminated, so as not to remind the conquerors that just beyond the walls of the stifling cities and the fences of the pacified countryside a more natural, free and exuberant existence was abundantly possible.

Did agriculture lead directly to the rise of civilization? Here, too, John ignores the symbolic relationship at the heart of primitive society. Tribal cultures, he needs to be reminded, are non-state societies: power is dispersed throughout society at large, not concentrated in individuals or institutions at its summit. Just as it is impossible to isolate the economic as a separate instance in

primitive society, it is also impossible to isolate the political as such. And yet symbolic exchange is manifestly “political.”

The endless cycles of gift exchange, the consumption of surpluses in feasts and potlatches, the chiefly duty to act as a conduit for the redistribution of wealth from haves to have-nots—all functioned to guarantee a society of equals where disparities of wealth and power couldn’t crystallize. A !Kung Bushman once described this political function of symbolic exchange in the following terms: “The worse thing is not giving presents. If people do not like each other but one gives a gift and the other must accept, this brings a peace between them. We give what we have. That it is the way we live together.” (Lorna Marshall, 1961, quoted in Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics*, 1972, p. 182)

Only when these norms of reciprocity were violated—replaced by norms of debt obligation, alienated labor and the accumulation of wealth—could the state, and ultimately civilization itself, irrupt from the depths of primitive society. Nor, if we are to judge from the countless tribal societies that only succumbed to the state through violence and conquest, can we assume that this irruption was inevitable. To say that agriculture led directly to the rise of civilization is to neglect the ways in which the cultural values of primitive society blocked or inhibited that transformation.

John makes a case for generalizing about agriculture in the same way as others have generalized about wage labor, industrialism, hierarchy and so on. But in doing so, he completely ignores the specific-and-unique-cultural being of primitive society. John reduces culture to a mere reflection of agricultural production, whereas what I’ve tried to show is that culture is an entity in its own right, one that, in fact, shapes the character of agriculture itself. And while John has described agriculture as synonymous with work, production and domination of nature, I’ve shown that none of these pejoratives can be used to describe primitive agriculture which—anti-productive, nature-affirming and gift-oriented as it is—stands in direct opposition to the values and practices of civilization.

Finally, John’s relentless hostility to agriculture raises an obvious question: what meaning can his apocalyptic jeremiad have in a world of five billion people, only a fraction of whom could be supported by hunting and gathering? Can such an appeal, if taken seriously, lead to anything but despair and nihilism? The answer, judging by John’s essay, is “no.” Wondering how the world’s billions are supposed to survive without agriculture, John concedes he has “few if any prescriptions” for reaching the hunter-gatherer Paradise. Yet he still concludes, somewhat masochistically, that liberation is impossible without agriculture’s dissolution. This final pronouncement is nothing but wishful thinking punctuated by desperation—theory at the end of its rope, openly proclaiming the impossibility of its realization.

Fantasies about an ultimate return to hunting and gathering do little to assist our liberation here, in the real world. Barring nuclear war, the total collapse of the biosphere, or the unlikely scenario of a cataclysmic AIDS epidemic drastically reducing human numbers, humanity will continue to depend on agriculture of some kind for a long time to come.

Indeed, our immediate survival—in a world worth living in, if not our survival as a species—depends on finding and implementing ecologically viable forms of agriculture that can serve as a basis for a liberatory society. The evidence of primitive society suggests that such an agriculture is possible, if only we can find our way back to nature. This is where we’re at, and what we must do; anything else is just whistling in the dark.

—Bob Brubaker  
Mishima, Japan

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Bob Brubaker  
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