

Can permaculture be confrontational?

Gardening for the middle-class or a challenge to capitalism?

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The greatest alienation that capitalism has wrought on humanity is perhaps not labor power, as posited by Marx, but rather the ability to live a life reliant on nature. Where once humanity was in intimate contact with the natural world, cityscapes, abstract economies, and industrial technocracy now dominate our lives.

Capitalist economic and legal structures have been extremely efficient at prohibiting subsistence economies. Land ownership is now a necessary requisite to interact with nature beyond supervised visitation to mismanaged landscapes. This alienation has occurred with such efficiency that nature's absence from society is practically perceived as a given.

The expulsion of peasants from the commons in the 17th century was the first primary action of modern capitalism. Removing the means for a subsistence economy made them dependent on social hierarchy, forcing them to sell their labor. As colonialism propagated across the Atlantic, it was necessary to destroy the lifeways of the Indigenous population, resulting in atrocities such as the murder of millions of bison. This caused the Indigenous people to become dependent on Western commerce, racking up debt and coercing them into signing unfavorable treaties.

Throughout history, one of the primary interventions of social hierarchy in human society has been to remove the capacity for communities to maintain subsistence lifestyles. If nature can provide the necessary resources for life, then accumulation is unnecessary. The illusion that systems of subsistence based on an accurate observation of nature cannot provide for our needs is crucial for the complicity with social hierarchy.

The promise of permaculture has been to eliminate this illusion through the application of extensive observation in the design of material systems that simultaneously enhances the evolutionary process of nature and provides for human needs. Accurate observations of the entire apparatus of ecosystems (rather than the dissection of components) allows the permaculture practitioner to replicate nature's material success.

The principles observed are applied to meeting human needs, ensuring that both present and future generations can enjoy lives with all material necessities met. Food, fiber, water, building materials, etc. are grown and produced in sophisticated systems of interconnection and interdependence that strongly resemble the ecosystem within which they reside. Through the permaculture design process, the inherently sustainable and resilient qualities of natural ecosystems are replicated in material human systems.

The ability of permaculture to provide for all human needs can preclude the social accumulation of power and the material accumulation of wealth. While some degree of authority is required due to the expertise required to design and maintain these systems, this authority is not highly technical or esoteric.

Juxtaposed with the technological expertise required to operate and maintain the extensive extraction-manufacturing economy, permaculture is extremely accessible. A centralized, hierarchical, de-localized system of resource management is unnecessary. Because the global capitalist economy is dependent on the extraction of materials, the transportation of these materials across vast distances, and the extensive manufacturing process required to produce consumer goods, the social hierarchy of technocrats, bureaucrats, the wealthy, and their enforcers who oversee this system lose their place in a material system that seeks to replicate nature in a localized system of interdependent components.

The ability for humans to learn from their environment and meet their needs utilizing accurate observations of nature has been a crucial part of our evolution. Permaculture is simply a modern, Western iteration of this inherently human capacity.

Indigenous societies around the world have thoroughly embraced this component of our humanity and have accomplished amazing things through its application. As posited by anarchist social theorist Murray Bookchin, the history of human development is the development of social institutions that successfully interface with nature in increasingly sophisticated ways, enhancing both the egalitarian components of society and the scientific.

To this end, Indigenous societies have been wildly successful. The development of Indigenous science has allowed countless societies to develop environmentally sound, sophisticated means of providing for human needs. Generally, Indigenous science consists of traditional ecological knowledge, wherein observations of the environment are embedded in cultural traditions and both preserved and added to for generations.

This practice has enabled Indigenous societies to accomplish feats such as long-term weather predictions because of the sheer volume of specific, localized data that their cultural traditions contain. Feats such as this are unreproducible by Western science due to the generalized, global nature of the data it can accumulate.

The impetus to accurately interface society with nature is an Indigenous principle that was responsible for the genesis of permaculture. Unfortunately, permaculture has moved further and further from its intended purpose.

While at the superficial level permaculture still embraces the material principles observed in nature, it has embraced the social systems of capitalism in seemingly subtle ways. Mainstream permaculture discourse does not examine the social constructs and history that produces capitalist systems of private property and ownership, and the privilege, oppression, and enforcement that these systems entail. This is a critical error.

Permaculture cannot achieve its purpose of the environmentally-sound material fulfillment of human needs from within the confines of private properties. The holistic material systems and nature-based societies that permaculture can facilitate are impossible in a landscape carved up by arbitrary delineations based on an abstract economic system.

These property lines have nothing to do with the material reality of the landscape and its ecosystems, with which permaculture is primarily concerned. This is an unavoidable problem for permaculture: a discourse that directly opposes this system of oppression and land-withholding must be developed in a permaculture context. Otherwise, the discourse of permaculture will

continue to degrade, confined to providing nature-based design science for the privileged and well-to-do, enabling them to live more ethical lives in closer proximity to nature while those without privilege remain excluded.

Without land ownership, the ability to practice permaculture is extremely limited. The strategy for circumventing this reality is glaringly absent from contemporary permaculture discourse. Growing vegetables in pots on a windowsill or balcony is not permaculture.

Growing vegetables in your backyard, surrounded by established fruit trees and supporting plant guilds, but still buying food from hundreds of miles away is not permaculture.

The rhetoric that claims, “you can do permaculture anywhere!” is overlooking the human impetus to have a subsistence relationship with nature and the original purpose of permaculture to provide it. Working with plants in isolated, impoverished settings is not a radical affirmation of our connection with nature and our ability to design both physical and social systems based on accurate observation. Compromise on this front is complicity with capitalist oppression.

Without confronting these social realities and their physical manifestations, permaculture cannot achieve its goals of providing nature-based design science for humanity. The avoidance of this reality has left the stakes at their zenith. Without a radical liberatory discourse, permaculture will forget its purpose, be swallowed by capitalism, and cease to exist.

To avoid this fate, permaculture methodology must integrate radical, lucid social observations. Permaculture has the unique potential to recognize and analyze the synonymous nature between social causes and environmental ones. Accordingly, a revision of fundamental permaculture methodology is required. Zone and sector analysis utilized by permaculture designers employs the assumption that the designer is working from within the confines of a private property.

This basic assumption must be eliminated to achieve the goals to which permaculture professes to aspire. Otherwise, these boundaries, enforced by capitalist hegemony, confine the permaculture practitioner’s imagination indelibly.

Designers need to lift their imaginations to the entirety of the watershed, to develop a science for the design of material systems that discards arbitrary borders including those of the nation state, and rigorously examines the delineation of territories, based both on social and physical realities. Nothing short of this rigor will oppose both the domination of our minds and spaces.

Self-determination and shared responsibility create the conditions necessary for the creation of systems that truly reflect the evolutionary mechanisms of nature, for this is how our species evolved to operate within its confines.

Human ingenuity and accurate scientific examination and design can only exist in circumstances of shared commonality, whereas private property places inherent limitations on our creative abilities, relegating us to self-absorbed organisms.

Permaculture possesses the scientific methodology to oppose the systems of private property and posit a radical alternative in terms of systems design, resource management, and attendant social systems, but it has hitherto failed to do so. This must change and permaculture must utilize all its knowledge for the task of opposing capitalism and liberating our fellow humans and the earth.

Designing plant guilds, eating home-grown fruits and vegetables, and enabling the middle and upper classes to live close to nature is not enough.

Only when permaculture embraces a liberatory, anarchist social discourse in radical opposition to global capitalism and systems of ownership, can it truly fulfill its purpose. It is the only fate befitting a discipline adopted from Indigenous science.

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