Kevin Tucker
Against Cultivation and in defense of wildness

Retrieved on 11 December 2010 from
green-anarchy.wikidot.com

theanarchistlibrary.org

Against Cultivation and in defense of wildness

Kevin Tucker

Contents

was working fine before the civilized decided they knew how to manage it better.

While there are plenty of differences between Monsanto and Mesopotamia, we have to ask how much scale is and what does this imply. As human ecologist Paul Shepard stated: "The domestication of plants and animals was the first genetic engineering." The question that I would pose then, is what makes us think that another anthropocentric approach that's 'not as bad' will get us out of the mess that we're in now as W.H. seems to imply with her cheek turned towards human history.

The problems we are facing in the world right now are the consequences of a system that would just dig a deeper grave instead of get out of the hole. What W.H. is proposing here is looking back to an earlier stage which intrinsically carried many of the same deprivations that we have now. The issue is scale, there is no question of this, but what we should be doing is not looking to where alienation wasn't as bad, but to where it didn't exist: in the millions of years that humans have existed as foragers. If there is going to be an attempt to transcend civilization, it will lie in eliminating the complete alienation that comes through the world being treated as our garden, and once again see the world as it is. It has provided a plentitude of diverse options that no horticulturalist has been able to follow up on that had the same qualitative sustenance.

What I'm getting at is that the history of civilization has shown us that every effort humans have made to modify the world towards something they thought could be better has only led to catastrophe, and now that catastrophe has reached endemic proportions. If we are talking about planting, the hopes should be to undo some of what we've inflicted upon the earth, and that requires giving into the chaos that moves all life. Simply put, don't assume you know more than the earth, and if you do chose to plant, let it be a step towards allowing the earth to heal free of human conceptions of what works best.

it's a matter of scale. W.H. takes some issue with the critique of domestication, which perhaps she isn't against, but the issue is beyond personal opinion. Domestication is an actuality that comes with cultivation and it applies to humans as much as the external world that is being brought under their dominion. My radical Webster's Dictionary defines domesticate as: "To train and adapt (an animal or plant) to live in a human environment and be of use to human beings" (I would modify 'human' with civilized). It is, by definition, anthropocentrism, much as all cultivation is essentially planning the world in a way that supposedly benefits humans.

W.H. takes no issue with domestication, although I know she has issue with anthropocentrism. Apparently her egocentric anthropocentrism comes for the need to help nature. She claims that while "hybrid seeds" are determined by the breeders, somehow "[o]pen-pollinated seeds defy this controlled approach"! Somehow domestication will save the world as these newly created seeds "are crucial to maintaining plant biodiversity." So we're destroying the original seeds that were naturally evolved on their own to create seeds to can outlast industrialism? Not sure how this argument works, but somehow I don't see domestication as playing any part in plant biodiversity. Granted I love strawberries, but what are the costs of these new seeds.

The originally domesticated grains were made so that the seeds could only be pulled off and not fall off, meaning that these plants could only reproduce with human intervention. Yes, we made plenty of 'diverse' plants, but they're all ones that we would like to have. The entire system is one that is human controlled, that is the aim, goal, and actuality of domestication, and in turn, we become slaves to the system that we have produced, although perhaps the joys of monotony, specialization and alienation are ones that W.H. is willing to let all other life take! I would hope that some may recognize that this planet

It doesn't take an anthropologist or an anarcho-primitivist to see that Witch Hazel's 'Against Agriculture & in Defense of Cultivation' (*Fifth Estate*, Spring 2003) took some rather revisionist looks at human history. Her argument for cultivation is framed within the larger confines of the obvious problems of industrial agriculture, but just because this is bad doesn't mean that other forms aren't.

What is going on here is the kind of trick that leftists are prone to use, and I would like to say I was disappointed to see Witch Hazel employing it so well. If you point out how bad things are now, then you can make a case for anything because it is something different, especially in this case where cultivation (which is never really defined) is blindly advocated. It reads very similar to vegan-advocacy books that point to the problems of mass agriculture and come to the conclusion that somehow a vegan world would fix all these problems. Needless to say, I don't see how Witch Hazel's 'cultivation' offers anything against the problems we face now.

Feeding Soul, Feeding Now

There is no question about anarchists holding off future lifestyle issues for 'after the revolution', but I'm not sure how "cultivation" offers much in the way of long term issues. I do think that permaculture offers some short term help, but I don't see much in the focus of long term issues. It will definitely be a helpful skill, but I think that, like most things, it has its limits. When shit does go down, I don't think it's going to be those who have gardens surviving and those who don't dying off. Those gardens may make certain people susceptible to raiding or may just not last or they may be successful. Either way, it never benefits to put all of your eggs in one basket, not to mention the limit of what you can fit in that garden.

I'm not a fan of spending time thinking about what the future may hold or what exactly will happen once civilization collapses as it surely will. Regardless of what genius plots people may be able to think up, people are going to do some crazy shit in order to try and sustain their 'life'. I won't focus on the entire picture here, but it seems to me that if people have interest in surviving the collapse, their best bet is learning gathering and hunting skills (and I'm not just talking about road kill here, once those cars stop running there won't be any left, better start learning and reconnecting here and now). There are far more options in gathering and hunting than there are in any kind of cultivation and it's probably a safe assumption to say that mobility is always going to be of the utmost importance.

If any kind of growing is going to be of use, it would be a blind seed spreading rather than gardening. I think any kind of anarchist practice would move as far away from property as possible and that sure isn't coming from gardens. The bottom line as far as planting goes seems to be that if you wish to be successful, you should mimic the growth that existed before civilization was inflicted upon this area. It makes sense not only in bioregional thinking, but in the fact that it flourished here before without human interaction so it can do it once again. Minimal effort, maximum output, and little human control. My emphasis is on rewilding, not re-planning the world around me.

In search of the primitivists

The most interestingly concocted part of 'Against Agriculture' was the 'Ancient Ways' section, which I would gather was the main reason this piece was written. I'm confused about Witch Hazel's references to "primitivist" "theory"; I don't think there's anything holistically theoretical about it really. The history of civilization is, rather non-coincidentally, linear and

ple, once the boundaries have been set up and constantly need to expand, will constantly go to war as competition over 'resources'. These are the same reasons that the modern state goes to war, albeit aided by super-technology. Regardless, it comes back to an issue of scale. Most horticultural peoples have accepted the warfare as a part of everyday life, and death is more inconsequential, perhaps even a means of population check.

These are the ways in which horticultural society can be appropriated to last longer and make a smaller impact. You have no other option in the long run than but to accept the warfare as part of the system, because horticulture is an ecologically taxing way of life. Once you step out of the true ancient ways, you are faced with this reality. The evidence of this is our past and the present in every aspect, just as the war on Iraq is over competing resources in a globalized economy. The more things change, the more they remain the same: the issue is scale, and frankly I'd rather see all of it destroyed than try to fix a system that was unnecessary from the beginning.

The deprivation of domestication

However, it's not much of a stretch to compare this kind of warfare as the result of deprivation that comes from monotony as we see it so clearly today. This is an essential part of an anarcho-primitivist critique, being that the beauty of life comes from the spontaneity and chaos of living wildness. Foragers have no need to recognize any kind of necessity or schedules, nor are they tied down to any particular region. Their lives flow around what they would like to be doing as opposed to what they have to be doing.

Horticulturalists isolate themselves from the rest of the wild world and become dependent upon a certain circumstance. They have more freedom to change their location and some details over mass agricultural societies, but the point remains:

often). What you are left with is a growing population who owns 'stuff' and is requiring steady access to certain 'resources' and 'territory'. Inevitably there will be clashes and there will be others who take up this way of life.

What you see historically when you look at horticulturalists (with very few exceptions, as mentioned earlier) is the origins of the 'war machine' that we have to live with today. Specialization allowed for some people to become more skilled in fighting and this became all the more necessary as others would compete for 'resources'. Horticultural peoples are above all recognizable by the high social value put on warring and raiding, in which indiscriminate killing would occur. There is a qualitative difference between this and modern warfare, since the peoples knew each other intimately.

Those who are competing for 'resources' are those who have lived around each other for long periods, often moving from enemies to friends. They are tied by a complex past which can be altered through marriage or necessity, and thus, your enemies are not strangers to you. In the highlands of Papua New Guinea, for example, there are various relations between tribes. There are mokas, huge ceremonies in which enemy tribes 'flatten each other' with gifts and thus defeat them. These take place roughly 3–10 years apart, but almost every ten years you will have some level of warfare, which can either be mock battles highlighted by name calling, intense physical battles or raiding. All of which are followed by roughly a decade of political and social readjustments resulting again in battles. Throughout this process, property lines are moved back and forth, populations rise and get cut back. What you have is essentially "war as an ecological process" as anthropologist Andrew Vayda has argued.

Horticulturalists are extremely brutal and battle prone. There are periods where fighting may not escalate beyond name calling, but it is not unheard of for it to extend to points where entire peoples were systematically wiped out. These peo-

the "primitivist" critique points towards what has happened. I don't think there's many guesses about it, and I'm not sure that Witch Hazel has done much to really contend it aside from what anarcho-primitivists that she knows have to say (which is not any kind of anarcho-primitivist ideology).

I'm not really sure about any kinds of "misconceptions" about the dawn of food cultivation representing a very real difference in how humans co-existed with their world. This isn't anything explicitly "primitivist", but a common understanding within fields of anthropology and general human history. Regardless, I'm assuming that "fall from grace" being in quotation marks would make it a quotation, although there's nothing that would actually implicate this being a "primitivist" theory. Despite the obvious consequences of domestication, it's probably safe to assume that using the very loaded words/phrases ("fall from grace", "impurity" and "fundamentalism") does make us anarcho-primitivists sound like religious fanatics, but this is where it gets good. Witch Hazel seems to think that if you botch things up enough, then it'll become the truth. So here we go.

W.H. states:

> "A basic misconception…about 'primitivist' theory is that the dawn of food cultivation some 10,000 years ago represented the 'fall from grace' of humanity, and that everything that has been developed since that point has been tainted with the impurity of 'domestication' and 'civilization'."

Again, I don't see the misconception here aside from an attempt to undercut this rather elementary understanding of human history as some kind of insane, religious theory. Food cultivation is marked by domestication, this is basic, civilization begins with the complex social situation that occurs with food cultivation, and this is basic. What's the problem here?

She continues: "this simplistic analysis reflects the same reductionist logic that has led to the social diseases of modern life." This is probably one of the best sentences in the whole essay! The analysis became simplistic when the author (dear ol' W.H.) simplified it. How it is reductionist is beyond me, unless you want to extend that statement and point to any kind of broad statement being reductionist. Regardless, we'd be implicating language as a whole (which the AP critique does) and then nothing would be worth arguing. Either way, I'm not sure how a connection is made between a "primitivist theory" and "the social diseases of modern life." Straw person anyone?

The argument goes on to show that somehow cultivation wasn't much of a difference at all, and from this point cultivation is anything from spreading seeds (via defecation) to agriculture, either way, the author makes no distinction in her sources here. Cultivation is suddenly "likely a simple adaptation for survival", but there is no evidence of this and unfortunately her blanket statement doesn't make it true.

Ancient Ways? A Critique of Cultivation

However, cultivation does have specific definitions whether W. H. likes it or not. Webster's even goes so far as to define it as: "To prepare or improve (land), as by fertilizing or plowing, for raising crops". I may have to check, but I'm pretty sure that the author of that bit wasn't an anarcho-primitivist, and by their definition, cultivation is limited to agriculture since this definition points to "fertilizing or plowing", a distinction that separates horticulture and agriculture. So far from shitting seeds, we actually have a permanent human impact on the soil via plowing. Given the clear fundamentalist edge that Webster's tends to carry, I'll settle for cultivation meaning the still anthropocentric "prepare or improve…for raising crops".

Sedentism, the War Machine

Cultivation is always egocentric; it is done for the benefit of a certain person/s. As mentioned earlier, cultivation is a directed effort, meaning that it's not like going out and hunting a wild animal or gathering wild plants, but it is an entire process, from start to finish that is intended for specific peoples. What happens is that a certain amount of land has been claimed by a specific group giving the implicit understanding that what happens on that land is no longer for the whole of the earth, but for those people who have now considered it theirs. By virtue of this, you have initiated the idea of 'property' which is completely alien to the world prior to this action and is unlikely to be recognized as different. Following from this, those peoples now have to ensure that this area, which is theirs by right of labor, must be kept as theirs. But why would anyone distinguish between any bits of land when there is no concept of property? The result is that this area must be guarded from outsiders who may come and take what is 'theirs'.

If you want to be realistic about horticulture, you need to look at the social realities. Humans in a 'natural' state live in a state of anarchy, and this was highlighted by the millions of years that humans lived as foragers without making permanent impacts and maintaining egalitarianism. Violence exists at all levels and all forms of societies, this is unquestionable. However, as an anarchist, it seems important to highlight a certain historical occurrence that make a stark difference in the ways human societies have acted with one another, primarily the creation of power.

By a very elementary anarchist critique, we understand the consequences of property as being at the cost of some thing else. What happens is that once people settle (become sedentary) and have an ample food supply, they are able to go against the natural 'binds' that keep populations in check and they are able to own more since they don't have to carry it around (as

economies) — whose notion of the numinous is vertical, ranging from a generalized sacred authority to the intense experience of unitive trance." The idea that your mode of production is replicated through all social means of your life can be seen throughout every society. The foragers live their spirituality, because they live as a part of the world, their sources of life are thus as abundant as their spiritual connections. Those who cultivate are relying on the ends of their labor, their faith replies. Everything is a delayed-reaction, especially their gods, and their relation becomes more increasingly mediated through specialists.

The dynamic is different between agriculturalists and horticulturalists who are not as alienated (and thus not as religious), but this doesn't change the underlying issues. Perhaps some comparisons are in order: when a yuppie buys stock, they pray for its endurance, or when a person buys a lottery ticket they pray that it will bring them good fortune. These aren't the acts of those who already have what they need, but those who are in a situation of spiritual deprivation or need (greed in this case). To say that Indian farmers pray for the endurance of the seeds is saying nothing more than they pray for the endurance of their livelihoods. This is not the same as praying for the extreme excesses above, but it all relates to the delayed-return, which we breathe, eat, sleep, and dream. Their relation with seeds (though the dependence is intrinsically no different than a foragers or one of us) is directly related to their relatively more direct act of food cultivation. There are huge differences here, but let's not let the more minor distinctions paint a picture of something that isn't there. Indian society is stratified and there are those who are marginalized and exploited by it. Their relation to seeds and goddesses says nothing more than it's better to diversify faith than put it in one god, it just makes sense to have other options when desperate.

As far as the gradations between horticulturalists and foragers, which W. H. has lumped together in her vague usage of 'cultivation', there are differences. When you look historically at the situation, it becomes easier to make an analogy to the situation: everyday, there is a transition period while the sun rises or sets, but outside of this short period, you always know damn well when it's day and when it's night. Regardless, it is important to realize that cultivation is just as much the bottom line for horticulturalists onwards, applying equally for Papua New Guinea highlanders to the Mid-Western United States.

The kind of groundless blanket statements are carried out to even further extremes as we follow the 'Native Americans could do no wrong' logic. Are we supposed to be surprised that "[e]ven today" people thrive on horticulture (no mention here of course of the problems those people are having in today's world)? I guess that means that it could last forever! Follow this further, even today people thrive on globalized, capitalist culture, does that say anything? W.H. needs to take a serious critical look at the human history since cultivation and not just think about how nice gardens are. What you will find is that horticulturalists always have property, hierarchy, are prone to institutionalized power roles, and are the originators of the modern military system.

Any way you look at it, you still have to come back to the idea that somehow cultivation is an "ancient way". As mentioned earlier, cultivation dates back only 13,000 to 10,000 years, and in this it spread very sporadically until various technological advancements made colonization more feasible on a large scale. When you juxtapose that against the millions of years that we've lived as foragers, it's hard to say that 1% of human history is ancient anything.

Cultivation is a recent adoption to human culture, and I don't think it's a stretch to say that it was one of the worst ideas yet. The same mentality that would place horticulture as ancient would have to say that books are ancient compared

to computers. The point being that older does not equate with "ancient". Again, just because it isn't as bad doesn't mean that it is any kind of ideal either.

Against Horticulture: the Origins of Civilization

Perhaps I'm a "fundamentalist", but I think that is irrelevant to this purely revisionist and deluded view of human history. Cultivation is not "the simple act of collecting seeds and replanting them elsewhere" and I have no idea where that definition comes from, or how that relates to horticulture. Horticulture is an invasive process. It can be far less destructive than our current agriculture, but what is that saying? A bullet kills as surely as a bomb; the issue seems to me to be of scale, which W.H. ironically points out later in her essay, but I'll get to that.

Let's start looking right here in North America where "dozens of Indian groups practiced [horticulture] without the trappings of civilization" with the later qualification of "aside from that which was imposed upon them". What you will find is similar to the rest of the world where horticulture was practiced. The majority of peoples, aside from the Plains Indians, practiced horticulture, which was still probably no more than 2,000 years old. They had property and the 'Iroquois Confederacy' held a large portion of the upper-east coast. Being the model for many later forms of democracy and even some 'anarchist' confederations, it's hard to say that this wasn't an institution of power over a relatively large area, meaning that these people were able to effectively control one another. That large of an area isn't likely to feel the same about everything and there wasn't a shortage of fighting and raiding.

In fact you'll find that there are the "trappings of civilization" not only here, but across North America. In fact, it seems that you can see many just by looking at the dynamics of the for-

of domestication as the origins of our current dilemma, because above all else, this is the definite event in which the social ills we are all faced with now begin. It's not like this is some kind of made up distinction, it is something that is clear and persistent throughout horticulturalists and almost always not present in gatherer-hunter kinships.

As far as horticulturalists go, they are almost always patrilineal, meaning that in a property owning society, property and relations are recognized through the males, giving an economic-political upward thrust. The most socially valued acts are granted to males (such as the growing of yams by males only for the Trobrianders [the yams have a social importance akin to money in capitalist societies]) and women are systematically pushed into lower social positions.

Sacred life versus the distant god/s

The new age co-option of such traditions as goddess religions arise later in the cultivation timeline through certain agricultural societies that W.H. later draws on: "When farmers in India plant a seed they pray for its endurance." Much as vegans uphold the ideal of ahimsa (a Hindu belief linked most commonly with the sacred cow) is similar to this in that it is giving a very one-sided look to what is the social circumstance. The cow is sacred because it provides life, not in its death, but through the milk it gives and the labor it provides. The seed is sacred because it is their source of life.

In his excellent work, Wandering God, anthropologist Morris Berman makes some extremely important distinctions that draw out the differences that underlie this kind of religiosity. He distinguishes the two: "[Hunter-Gatherer] society (or more precisely, immediate-return economies) — whose conception of the sacred is diffuse, paradoxical, and horizontal — and agricultural civilization (or more generally, delayed-return

graded as males see themselves as the bearers of the whole society. The importance of the mother-child relation is thus degraded and the domestic becomes secondary to the direct roles of sustenance. This juxtaposes rather harshly against other foraging societies such as the !Kung in which women bring in 60–80% of the food and communal relations are much more highly regarded.

It's hard to say that the principle of who brings in the calories gets treated good is the primary factor. Youths and the elderly are figured highly in gatherer-hunter societies, although again this relation is different for the Inuit. The elderly and youth aren't treated badly, but there are practices of female infanticide and it is considered noble for the elderly to commit suicide (it is important to remember that this means they socially uphold this and it's not a case of those around them saying things like, "isn't it time you killed yourself?"). What seems to underscore this is the issue of abundance with equal access. A male, female, or other can not be kept from going out and collecting enough to care for themselves when they have the skills that come with the foraging life.

When you create property or limit ability, you are thus concentrating the ability to live. Women are perfectly capable of gardening and still collecting in horticultural societies, but the males own the gardens and thus control the surplus (not to mention the anthropocentrism here considering limited access for other animals or the cycles of life). As we've seen throughout all of history, those who control the surplus control the people, but we've also seen that the lifeway we've existed in for 99% of our time here has intentionally kept societies from allowing this kind of concentration.

Anarchy, in its truest form, is our heritage, and it denies any means of control, and thus any kind of power and property. While horticulturalist societies are often lacking any formal power roles (chiefs), there is a kind of stratification that originates here. This is why anarcho-primitivists focus on the dawn

agers of the Plains with the horticulturalists who surrounded them. They adopted many of the horticulturalists values and raiding and war parties took a rather high social role. There were wars and massacres, but I guess you'll have these things right?

When you look upon the ruins of the civilizations that grew along the Mississippi River, you'll find huge mounds or pyramids if you will. Perhaps these were just past time buildings for horticulturalist people and not any sign of extreme social hierarchy and stratification as you had in every other civilization that built pyramids (including numerous North American ones). I guess the Inca never really did have civilization though even if they did have a ranked society in which peasants were ritualistically slaughtered to appease the gods as the soils were wrenched. Perhaps there weren't institutionalized sexual divisions of labor among sedentary peoples of the Northwest either?

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that these are the same as what is here now, but I see no reason to call them what they are not. The horticulturalists here tended to be rather civilized to the point that foragers surrounding them even adopted some of their belief systems (arguably of necessity). I think there's substantial reason to believe that these people were hardly "egalitarian" on any kind of a holistic basis. I digress though, my interests as an anarchist aren't to tell people how to live, but to try and destroy the systems the make true autonomy impossible, namely civilization. Frankly, the Yanomamï practicing a rather brutal form of horticulture doesn't affect me here, but if I'm claiming to be an anarchist and pointing in certain directions, why would I point to something that's not anarchy?

W.H. has expressed disliking to the idea of burning out sections of forests to me before, but what is the process of horticulture? Almost all remaining horticulturalists live in forests. Fields and villages are not in areas of the forest that are downed,

they are cleared out by 'slash and burn' methods. This means that decent sized portions of the forest are cut and burned down to make way for fields to cultivate and live. The practice itself is arguably 'sustainable' if the population is kept in check and no one moves into the area. Historically this isn't the case though. Once you remove all the natural birth control methods (part of sedentism) that foragers adopt via their lifeway, populations will gradually grow. The fields are worked until it is no longer 'profitable' for them to be worked, then they are left fallow and new fields are worked. This system keeps land from being completely killed off, but it is limited, and after so long each plot can only be worked so long. So yes, people can exist this way for a significant amount longer, but it is still limited in the longer run and what are the costs?

Delusions of collectivity

W.H. shows her lack of knowledge on the matter when she claims that:

> "Subsistence horticulture doesn't…require specialization of labor, or long monotonous work hours. The most effective methods have always been diversified community efforts, which cut down on work hours as well as monotony."

I'm curious as to what horticulturalist peoples W. H. has been looking into, because this surely isn't the case for almost all horticulturalists that have existed until more recently or are still struggling to maintain their own lives. The only real exception that I've found among horticulturalists are the Pueblo who are ecologically forced to have a stronger social connection and form of cooperation, but that is one case of many, and I'm not interested in getting into details about their lives here.

However, across the rest of the planet you don't find this kind of odd example that W.H. points to above. In nearly every horticultural society that I've looked into, the fields are privately owned, and communal work hardly extends beyond the nuclear family at most, or unilineally recognized male kinsfolk, and there is an intensified specialization of labor, primarily in the means of warriors, which will be the focus of the following section. Either way, horticulturalists do work longer hours than foraging counterparts. There are fewer people needed to be directly involved in bringing in food, but the slack isn't spread around, instead you have specialization.

This is most typified in the existence of big men leading up to chiefs. Most of these societies don't have a solidified political structure, but there are more 'influential' people and chiefs arise from this. What you are seeing is the process of centralization albeit on a slower scale than 'Western' style centralization. Having possessions and fixed locality create social problems and private accumulation of wealth create issues that anarchists ideally should concern themselves with. Not to mention that with specialization comes a solidifying division of labor, meaning that work does become more monotonous because you do very specific tasks daily.

The end of egalitarianism

What I would assume would be an extremely important focus for W.H., but it is looked right over, that is the issue of patriarchy. Horticultural societies are marked by a break with the more prevalent egalitarianism of foraging societies. This is the end result of a process which can be exemplified by the case of the Inuit, the only nomadic foragers who encompass more patriarchal values (i.e. viewing women as objects). The Inuit represent an anomaly among foragers because the women bring in little to none of the subsistence. They are thus socially de-