

Uncivilizing Permaculture

An Anti-Civilization And Anti-Colonial Critique Of “Sustainable Agriculture”

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In this essay, I wish to explore the way that permaculture intersects with an (anarchist[ic] and anti-colonial) anti-civilisation critique. By no means do I wish to tow some anarcho-primitivist line (though some inspiration from it is not denied), but rather to raise questions of where permaculture may accompany a critique of civilisation, and where it possibly diverges. Some of the critiques I raise here stem from my years of study and experience in the area, in which my critical lens often came to be at odds with my colleagues.

In the contemporary environmentalist milieu both the theory of permaculture and its practice have become popular as means by which to repair the earth's depleting topsoil and to otherwise attempt to live more sustainably with our planet. It is but one response to the ecological crisis that we face, whether the conversation is centred around climate change, environmental destruction, food security, or the totality.

So what is permaculture? One of the co-organizers of the permaculture concept Bill Mollison, and his colleague Scott Pittman, define it as such:

"Permaculture (Permanent Agriculture) is the conscious design and maintenance of cultivated ecosystems which have the diversity, stability & resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape, people & appropriate technologies, providing good, shelter, energy & other needs in a sustainable way. Permaculture is a philosophy and an approach to land use which works with natural rhythms & patterns, weaving together the elements of microclimate, annual & perennial plants, animals, water & soil management, & human needs into intricately connected & productive communities."

Permaculture as a concept is, in fact, quite broad. This opens it up as both something more in tune with the true complexities of world, yet vulnerable to co-optation. Permaculture exists not as a singularity, but as a multiplicity. For example, agriculture is a discipline of food production, unaware of its relationship to other disciplines, whereas permaculture is inter-disciplinary: it attempts to understand the interconnectedness of an ecosystem as a totality.

Given how broad the concept of permaculture is, there can be no generalised analysis of it. Rather, we can explore the different aspects of it both in theory and practice, and see how these compliment or detract from an anti-civilisation critique.

Before I go on, it may be helpful to explain where I'm coming from. There was a time quite a few years ago when, after having become more acquainted with anti-civilisation ideas, I began to deconstruct such things as my relationship to the earth, and my own autonomy – i.e. my own self-sufficiency. What skills did I have? What did I know about the earth/natural world? What did I know about my landbase/bioregion? I had in fact been travelling for a long time, and had very little sense of place. Eventually, I thought it was time to return to the lands I grew up in (or thereabouts), as in fact that was where permaculture had first developed. At that time, I saw learning about permaculture as a means to develop a relationship to one of the things that sustains me – food. Of course I had wilder dreams as it were, but I saw this as a starting point.

And from there, in different forms, I eventually studied permaculture, both formally through multiple courses, and informally through reading, meeting people, participating in projects.

And this is where my journey began.

The Problem Of Cities: Urban Permaculture

Most of my participation in permacultural projects, both in courses or otherwise, was generally urban-based. This of course is not so surprising, due to the fact I lived in the city during these times. I did, however, experience some rural dimensions to this, specifically one rural course (in that case, just outside of the city), and quite a few rural excursions. This is on top of the rural aspects to the permaculture design that I was required to learn in both courses. In permaculture design, a given property is traditionally divided into five (or six) zones. According to Wikipedia,

“Zones are a way of intelligently organizing design elements in a human environment on the basis of the frequency of human use and plant or animal needs.”

However, due to the generally smaller size of urban properties, only the first three zones (zone 0 being the house) are ever really utilised, though this may change to two due to the disappearance of backyard space. That is the main scope of urban permaculture.

One aspect of permaculture that straight off the bat stands out for analysis is how it manifests in urban environments. Permaculture as seen in cities can include community gardens, city farms, backyard gardens, and is an attempt to make urban spaces more self-sufficient and reduce our carbon footprint. An anti-civilisation critique of cities is that their existence is predicated on the importation of resources (e.g. food) from rural areas. Permaculture, especially of the urban variety, attempts to mediate this. Funnily enough, in both of the courses I undertook, the idea of the carbon footprint was presented, and we at least once analysed our own.

As it is, with such a concentration of humans in a confined space, there isn't room in their immediate area to produce the means of their subsistence. The importation of resources, most importantly food, then creates a larger carbon footprint. The further the distance required to import these things, the more the system relies on of the existence of industrial infrastructure to move the (e.g. a truck moves food from a farm to a supermarket in the city, which is fuelled by petroleum, which is transported by ship from Saudi Arabia, which is mined by equipment which is also fuelled by petroleum... ad infinitum).

So then, permaculture looks at a given situation and tries to use design principles in order to use the pre-existing features on a piece of land (whether rural or urban) to advance further self-sufficiency, with a lower ecological impact (i.e. carbon footprint), and generally to make a property more green. This indeed goes beyond food, as it is a holistic approach to analysing a given place, and can also include such things storing water, using natural light, composting, etcetera.

It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss in detail (though I will briefly) whether permaculture designed cities can produce enough food for their inhabitants. Such contexts do not exist in my experience in the West. On top of that, Havana (Cuba) is often championed as the great hope of urban permaculture (see the documentary *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*) – whilst still not producing all of its own food. I do think what happens there is an interesting experiment, as experimentation is important to our adaptivity to the changing context of the ecological chaos ahead of us, yet I do also think such a fixation with “saving the cities” may well instead be dancing with the devil, yet another manifestation of greenwashing.

Breaking this down more, there is this emphasis on taking inspiration from nature, of which a city is quite the antithesis, and such a density of humans cannot support the carrying capacity of a given area. According to Wikipedia:

“The carrying capacity of a biological species in an environment is the maximum population size of the species that the environment can sustain indefinitely, given the food, habitat, water and other necessities available in the environment.”

According to Toby Hemenway, Paris produces 30% of its own food, more than most western cities, and similarly, Hugh Warwick notes that Havana produces up to 50%. So even in the permaculture mecca, the dependence on rural agriculture (permaculture?) is still 50%. Hemenway, a permaculturist, who lives in the city of Portland, goes on to say:

“We can get better at growing food in the cities, but I don’t think we can get good enough”.

I tend to agree. Population densities characteristic of cities are not harmonious with any sort of ecological carrying capacity. And I think that the idea of cities is so embedded in at least some strands of permaculture that manifests even outside of the city.

Indeed, I believe there is a certain dishonesty, or disillusionment at best, within the western urban permaculture philosophy, saying that certain modes of living – lifestyles, can be synthesized with carrying capacity. They cannot. This goes beyond simply the existence of cities, as I have witnessed the simple transplantation of the urban lifestyle into the rural setting. There is an individualism rife here, intertwined into a mess of hyper privilege – owning land by oneself (or simply reproducing the nuclear family), paying for both the design and construction to be undertaken by other people, maintaining all their creature comforts of the city (e.g. electricity, going to the supermarket), amongst others. Often, these houses will be much larger than are necessary. This almost appears to be an excuse for such people to ethically live in luxury. It is disgusting, and this very thing typifies my current difficulty with identifying at all with permaculture. Some also try to build themselves, but whether it’s a matter of their design or lack of workforce, it takes decades for them to finish building their homes. Again, if we are to take inspiration from nature, we need not look further than ourselves. When our species has lived with nature rather than opposed to it, both in the past and in remnants today, we evolutionarily live together – in a community. As Kevin Tucker said, “Rewilding is never a solitary adventure.”

An important distinction to make, however, is that such manifestations of permaculture differ greatly according to context, such as access to wealth. What this means in practice specifically is how technology is used. In richer countries, especially in urban environments, the fixation with usage of complex technological gadgets increases. Rather than it being an option, it often seems like more of a social norm. If access plays a big part in what permaculture may look like, then the versions of permaculture that may appear more ecologically sound will be simpler designs that don’t require the same access to economic privilege and resources that highly technological projects do. It is this simplicity, in the end, that inspires adaptation, holistic design, and knowledge out of necessity.

The Problem Of Semantics: Peak Oil/Energy Descent, Sustainability And The Collapse

One interesting and illuminating divergence is the way in which peak oil (or peak everything in Richard Heinberg’s words) is framed. Rather than using the aforementioned words, or even the more emotive and provocative collapse, some permaculturists like David Holmgren refer to a concept of “Energy descent” (also referred to as “Creative Descent”). This refers to:

“[the] retraction of oil use after the peak oil availability... the post-peak oil transitional phase, when humankind goes from the ascending use of energy that has occurred since the industrial revolution to a descending use of energy.”

One of the really productive elements of this framework as opposed to that of a more collapse-style, is that creating this imagery of a descent debunks the idea that there is some magical climactic event which will bring forth mass ecological destruction and the fall of civilisation. Instead, this points towards things unfolding in stages, and possibly quite slowly (relatively speaking). However, it goes beyond that, as it also is framed as a gentler, voluntary descent rather than one that is out of our hands. More specifically, another popular concept in this milieu is Energy Descent Planning (i.e. transition), a process developed by the Transition Towns Movement. This is a system for developing local plans to design and prepare for energy descent. In this sense, it means the actual process of gradually changing the way we live, such as the energy sources we use (alternative energy), to be healthier for the earth and to soften the energy descent.

Overall, this is a really helpful way to frame the equation. Creating frameworks where we positively are working together, decentralised, in our region-specific communities speaks to the heart. However, such positive wording is not without its dangers, i.e. greenwashing. Not to mention that it can create the illusion that perhaps things aren't so bad. It's in the cliché false dichotomy of positive/negative, where one may say, “I don't want to think of the negatives, just the positives.”. Of course, I'm not suggesting you go out looking for so-called negative experiences, but rather, the trap is the bubble. You'll forget reality. Indeed, it would be quite a bubble for you to forget reality in its entirety (people do try!), but with the types of walls that people create in their lives, in their minds, bursting some bubbles sometimes is a necessary reality check.

It may not be a collapse. Maybe it will be an energy descent. We could be lucky. But honestly, we really don't know what will happen. What I do know is that it may be fucking horrible and no positive wording will save us from whatever comes ahead of us.

Then there's this idea of sustainability. What exactly does sustainable even mean?

In breaking down the word “sustainability” to try to flesh out what it really entails, Toby Hemenway's lecture *How Permaculture Can Save Humanity and The Planet, but not Civilization*, illuminates the conversation. What he posits is that sustainability is, in fact, a bit of a misnomer. It's not really something that relates to a healthy ecology, but rather survival amidst destruction. For example, so-called sustainable logging may not directly affect the logging of other forests outside of designated sustainable logging coup, but it doesn't help heal any of the destruction that has been, will be, and is currently waged on these forests. So Hemenway places sustainability as a halfway point between what he refers to as degenerative and regenerative practice. The former relates to actions that facilitate the degradation of ecosystems (i.e. everything the dominant culture does), whilst the latter facilitates ecosystem healing (i.e. everything the dominant culture doesn't do). It's an interesting point, and in fact helps break down the façade that claims that this buzzword, sustainability, is helping to save the planet. It's greenwashing again, trying to excuse our destructive lifestyles. So in permaculture, regenerative practice attempts to mimic natural ecological functions that help repair the different types of damage that have been inflicted by civilisation. The message is clear; ceasing civilisation's damage to the earth and being “sustainable,” will not save the earth. Until you find me a solar panel that doesn't require mining, the damage is still being done.

The Problem Of Agriculture: Horticulture, Permaculture, And The Wild

So then the question arises—is it a question of scale? So-called urban permaculture ends up being (or at least depending on) another form of agriculture. We may get better at growing food in cities, but cannot grow all of it ourselves: hence, rural agriculture. Where does that leave permaculture? And where does that leave the wild? Some propose an anthropological look at horticultural societies as a possible link between permaculture and the wild. Jason Godesky and Toby Hemenway attempt to define horticulture:

“As I mentioned, [Yehudi] Cohen [in *Man in Adaptation*] locates another form of culture between foraging and agriculture. These are the horticulturists, who use simple methods to raise useful plants and animals. Horticulture in this sense is difficult to define precisely, because most foragers tend plants to some degree, most horticulturists gather wild food, and at some point between digging stick and plow a people must be called agriculturists. Many anthropologists agree that horticulture usually involves a fallow period, while agriculture overcomes this need through crop rotation, external fertilizers, or other techniques. Agriculture is also on a larger scale. Simply put, horticulturists are gardeners rather than farmers.”

To emphasize the difference here, the mention of things like fertilisers is important because the intensity and scale of agriculture is predicated on external sources of nutrients, and even energy. This is similar to a city’s reliance on external resources to maintain itself. Large-scale permaculture requires large wild spaces for resources (i.e. mining – petroleum, etc). But of course as cities expand, wild spaces must contract, as is exemplified by agriculture and especially industrialism.

Both horticulture and permaculture contain elements of gardening. They both have this measure of scale to them, and encourage diversity (as opposed to agriculture’s monocropping). There is a continuum between permaculture and foraging. For example, permaculture’s most wild zone, zone 5, allows for hunting and foraging. And even some of what has been perceived as foraged wilderness in horticultural societies has sometimes turned out to actually be their version of a permaculturist’s food forest. If then, the aim is the wild, and not simply the garden, then permaculture is a step in the right direction. Though, to be honest, it never seemed that many permaculturists I encountered ever seemed to see the forest for the trees – they only ever saw a garden.

Permaculture allows for multiple functions, ecologically, but Hemenway also claims that it can’t perform all of them, hence the necessity of large wild spaces:

“You can’t just turn the whole world into a garden. There are major eco-system functions that aren’t going to happen if we have completely gardened the entire planet. We don’t know enough about eco-system functions to run it all ourselves. We have to let alot of it stay wild so that alot of the not well-perceived and not well understood and unmanageable eco-system functions can proceed.”

So again, permaculture’s success, like that of horticulture, is predicated on allowing wild spaces for ecosystem functions. And here, in the presence of the wild, is where the question of the carbon footprint and carrying capacity really clash. The standard understanding of an individual’s carbon footprint refers to how much land, or how many Earth’s (!) are required for their needs. This usually relates to human use of land – agriculture. But if the whole world were a farm, or a garden, then where would the animals be? No, not cows or chickens, but wilds animals. Where will the resources be? Carrying capacity relates to every living being (human or not) in a given bioregion, so there’s an obvious problem with anthropocentrism to some extent within permaculture too. So every inch of this Earth is not simply a production unit, as some may perceive with their precision in measuring the output from growing grain on a piece of land versus using it to raise cows. The trick, again, is

anthropocentrism. Both choices agricultural and neither allow for the survival of wild animals. This brings up biocentrism, the idea that we don't inhabit this planet for our exclusive use – we share it.

Jason Godesky also talks about origins in the link between permaculture and horticulture:

“The fact that so many favorite permacultural techniques—enhancing edge, intercropping, guilds, and even many of Fukoka's techniques like seedballs—are to be found among horticultural cultures around the world, is certainly instructive. Is there anything that can distinguish permaculture from horticulture? To date, I have been unable to find anything, leading me to the conclusion that permaculture is largely re-inventing the horticulturalist wheel.”

So it isn't just that permaculture and horticulture have some incidental similarities, but that permaculture is directly influenced by horticulture. It's similar to the way that anarcho-primitivism is influenced by hunter/gatherer societies. It can be seen as a way for those (e.g. Europeans) whose Earth-based cultures and lifeways have been destroyed, to give credence to those whose lifeways existed in the past or still exist. No doubt, enduring horticultural techniques have been integrated into permaculture, as proven by “permaculturists” who were already doing it before it was “invented”. Rediscovered knowledge of techniques such as seedballs has been also integrated. Literally, it seems like a process of relearning what we had been doing right, what worked. But this process, of course, is coming from our current situation, reliant on industrial agriculture. Where we are coming from is so tainted, not simply by our resource heavy techniques (e.g. materials dependent on mining), but by globalisation and colonisation. This includes plants and animals of course, though I am by no means being necessarily dogmatic against non-native species (which includes humans!). But what I'm also referring to is ideology.

By ideology, I don't mean some vague anti-everything ideology. Everyone believes in something, or at least uses certain words as a way to convey an approximation of one's ideas, though of course these words will never have any authentic meaning because of symbolic language. We get inspired by many things, and identify in various ways, but the point is to find it in your own context. Ideology homogenizes. Agriculture is ideological. And its ability to universally apply itself to any and all contexts is colonisation. Moreover, the predication of agriculture upon exterior resources because of the depletion it creates in its own context necessitates expansion. This is civilisation.

The Problem Of Ideology: Eurocentrism, Globalisation And Autonomy

“Agriculture itself must be overcome, as domestication, and because it removes more organic matter from the soil than it puts back. Permaculture is a technique that seems to attempt an agriculture that develops or reproduces itself and thus tends toward nature and away from domestication. It is one example of promising interim ways to survive while moving away from civilisation.”

- John Zerzan

Where does this leave us now? Indeed, permaculture is a continuum to horticulture. Perhaps then, that allows for permaculture as a transitory process in line with an anti-civilisation critique, and perhaps even anarcho-primitivism. However, as with everything under capitalism, under civilisation, they have insidious mechanisms which help perpetuate and reproduce themselves. And through globalisation and colonisation, the ideology of Eurocentrism has spread. John E. Drabinski posits this:

“Eurocentrism is a key component of colonialism not just as a political and economic relation, but as a cultural project: taking itself as its own measure, Europe could do its violent work across the globe without ever being put in question by the victims. Further, and doubling the violence, taking

itself as its own measure underpinned the missionary relation as civilizing force that figured as central to global domination after conquest and enslavement. Conversion to European languages and values (in the broadest sense) becomes equivalent to installing civilization where none previously existed.”

And the zine *Desert* relates this to anarchism:

“That this is happening as part of globalisation, and the growth of cities is not surprising given that the seeds of social movement Anarchism are largely carried around the planet on the coat tails of capitalism and often grow best, like weeds, on disturbed ground.”

The same, of course, could be said about anarcho-primitivism, autonomous Marxism, insurrectionary anarchism, as well as many other Western -isms, such as the multitude of those used in identity politics. You can see it in the plants in permaculture gardens – diets imported from elsewhere, and consolidated through genocide. Countless are the arguments I got into with my fellow permaculturists about the romanticisation of European plants and animals. You can see it in the ideas that are normalised in our societies, in the microcosm, in our communities (or lackthereof). The point isn’t to prevent idea-sharing (nor to create some false dichotomy of “pure” and “not pure”), or to disallow criticism, but simply to recognize autonomy. The imposition of ideas, and the held superiority of these ideas from a place of power (i.e. White supremacy/Eurocentrism), is the very antithesis of this. In *Green Anarchy*, Aragorn! similarly talks about Self-determination and Radical decentralization. The point here is that people, anarchists for example, may form a politic into a singularity. This is where solidarity dies, a place where you don’t engage with people outside your “understanding of reality,” but rather expect “reality to conform to their subject understanding of it.” Furthermore, *Aragorn!* presents some interesting ideas on what he thought could be an Indigenous Anarchism:

“... an anarchism of place. This would seem impossible in a world that has taken upon itself the task of placing us nowhere. A world that places us nowhere universally. Even where we are born, live, and die is not our home. An anarchism of place could look like living in one area for all of your life. It could look like living only in areas that are heavily wooded, that are near life-sustaining bodies of water, or in dry places. It could look like travelling through these areas. It could look like travelling every year as conditions, or desire, dictated. It could look like many things from the outside, but it would be choice dictated by the subjective experience of those living in place and not the exigency of economic or political priorities. Location is the differentiation that is crushed by the mortar of urbanization and pestle of mass culture into the paste of modern alienation. Finally an indigenous anarchism places us as an irremovable part of an extended family. This is an extension of the idea that everything is alive and therefore we are related to it in the sense that we too are alive. It is also a statement of a clear priority. The connection between living things, which we would shorthand to calling family, is the way that we understand ourselves in the world. We are part of a family and we know ourselves through family. Leaving aside the secular language for a moment, it is impossible to understand oneself or one another outside of the spirit. It is the mystery that should remain outside of language that is what we all share together and that sharing is living.”

I take inspiration from many things, such as permaculture and anarcho-primitivism, amongst others. I don’t see them as roadmaps to our liberation (that is not necessarily how they intend to be taken, though that doesn’t mean people don’t perceive them that way). The way I see it, both encourage location specific, adaptive strategies for the roads ahead. I also see them as tools for us to discover liberation in ourselves, in our friends, family, communities, and in our landbases. But it doesn’t really matter whether you use these words or not. As for me, things like permaculture and anarcho-primitivism are to some degree re-inventing the wheel. However, they are helpful for us in remembering what we were already doing right in our cultural histories. We can use different words,

words from our own cultures for example, but if we were to truly search for any words that could describe our desires, of love, of wildness, and of total liberation, I would find that there are no words at all: silence.

Becoming wild and free, again, is a progression. The disease of the spectacle, of such things as instant gratification, creates these delusions that things are immediately consumable and causes us to move on to the next thing. In nature, this is a falsehood. When we develop direct relationships with our food, friends/family/community, bioregion, etc, our perception of time inevitably changes. We can't rewild overnight. Not likely even in our lifetime. The destruction of civilisation is a long-term project as well. But we are but a speck in the lifespan of this earth, and the beginnings of the world we are building will be in our children, and in their children, in the children of the foxes who ate your chickens. And in the ashes of the world we leave behind.

“Any bioregion can be liberated through a succession of events and strategies based on the conditions unique to it.”

- Seaweed

It will be a process, both wild and organic, adaptive and local, generational, learning from yourselves and each other, where in the diminishing of ideological homogenisation, diversity reigns, human and nature. Permaculture could be a step. Anarcho-primitivism could be too. I may not stick entirely to the path, but the tracks seem to lead me in a direction I want to be going.

- Tanday Lupalupa

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