

Subsistence Gardening as Resistance

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I

“Today we are still preoccupied with creating gardens. Why? To not suffer from hunger. Because having rice, beans, fava beans, maize, peanut — then one can survive.” — **Renato, of the Canela community**¹

“The development of what we know as agriculture was not an overnight phenomenon, but rather a several thousand year-long project. In some places in the world, the earliest stages of cultivation were never surpassed, and remain sustainable today. In many more places, the pressures of the global economy have corrupted these practices just in this last century. But in most of the world today, we are witnessing the full-blown colonization of native foodways, and a nearly complete dependence on western industrial practices. To trace this “biodevastation” directly back to cultivation itself, is to ignore the history of conquest and land displacement that pushed the food systems of subsistence cultures to the brink, where they now teeter on the edge of extinction.” — **Witch Hazel, Against agriculture & in defense of cultivation**

Situated in dense forests and savanna of the Brazilian state of Maranhão lives the indigenous Canela people. In the past they lived from hunting, gathering and gardening but starting from 200 years ago as they were pushed from their traditional territory as settler farmers occupied the land bit by bit. The lush forests are being replaced by industrial eucalyptus and soy plantations, and cattle ranches. They now inhabit an area 5 to 10 percent of their original territory. Traditionally the Canela travelled from place to place as the seasons changed but now adopt a more sedentary lifestyle living in bigger permanent villages. Although the Canela still depend on hunting and foraging they don't have access to a big enough land base to cover all their needs so they increasingly depend on gardening to meet their needs.

For the Canela gardening is not just to meet their subsistence needs but also a means of resistance against being assimilated into the structures, networks, dependency and the institutional inequality of the Brazilian state, religious institutions, and multinational corporations who are constantly trying to infringe and occupy the Canela's home.

Other threats to the Canelas way of life are from the environmental effects from the industrialized agriculture of soy and eucalyptus production that causes water depletion which exacerbates drought and soil erosion. The overuse of fertilizers and agrochemicals annihilates plant biodiversity and pollutes the local rivers and waterways with high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus which in turn causes algal blooms which can produce toxins that are harmful to animals and cause dead zones from the reduction of oxygen in the water starving fish and plants. So any flora or fauna living near a eucalyptus or soy plantation is at risk.

The Canela's subsistence gardening approach is totally different from monocrop agriculture. They work with nature using a conscious ecological and more biodiverse method. Typically in agriculture only a small variety of cash crops are grown in large fields covering acres upon acres of land where in the Amazon large sections of jungle are destroyed. For the Canela gardeners instead of being dependent on a small variety of cash crops they cultivate over 300 varieties of plants to meet their subsistence needs. Instead of using destructive hellish machines like

¹ Plant Kin. A Multispecies Ethnography In the Indigenous Brazil by Theresa L. Miller

bulldozers, ploughs, and combine harvesters they use a slash and burn method to clear small patches just enough for them to use and their tools consist of a digging stick and woven baskets. They only use the same garden for two years and then not use the same area for at least eight years to allow the forest to regrow and return fertility to the soil.

The Canela's vast knowledge of plants helps them determine which ones make good companions that will help each other grow, which ones are natural repellents to predatory insects that will attack the plants, and which plants to grow which will attract beneficial insects such as pollinizers. And likewise their vast knowledge of soil helps them to consciously plant to suit the 10 different soil groups in their area which will help prevent soil erosion, nutrients depletion, and combat against other harmful effects that are typical of agriculture. Their focus is for caring for the well-being of local biodiversity and the nonhuman inhabitants.

The Canel don't see themselves as farmers but parents looking after their plant kin viewing their saved seeds and cuttings as their babies and their growing crops as their infants, genuinely loving them in the same way as if they were their human children caring for the plants as the plants care for them. They view the environment as consisting of human and nonhuman "selves", and gardening as caretaking for themselves and their plant and human families.

II

"We are being led to our slaughter. This has been theorized in a thousand ways, described in environmental, social, and political terms, it has been prophesied, abstracted, and narrated in real time, and still we are unsure of what to do with it. The underlying point is that the progress of society has nothing to offer us and everything to take away. Often it feels like we are giving it away without a fight: when we sell our time for money, allow our passions to be commodified, invest ourselves in the betterment of society, or sustain ourselves on the spoils of ecological destruction, we openly (though not consensually) participate in our own destruction." — **Serafinski, Blessed is the Flame, An introduction to concentration camp resistance and anarcho-nihilism**

Civilizations' death culture of accumulation, exploitation and consumerism, at whatever the cost is at its final stages spreading war and ecocide to every corner of the globe.

It has turned individuals into consumerist herds of wage slaves making us all addicted to some degree or other waiting for the false promises that will never be delivered for most.

How many individuals do actually want to work? I know I don't. How many actually find pleasure in it having to repeat day after day, after day? Or have to give up on achieving their dreams, or sell themselves in the hope of reaching them?

This is the culture which creates the conditions of refugees fleeing the carnage of war having to walk across a continent to find safety, a better life for themselves and their family all the while begrudging fools would rather see them drown in the medaterian sea along with their children on dinghies so packed with desperate individuals it sinks.

While taking part in solidarity projects I've seen mothers in France having to live in muddy fields infested with rats, flimsy tents as protection from the elements. Small groups huddle around fires trying to catch some heat. Babies cries can be heard across the camp. I've seen the muddy swamp-like trails that weave through the refugee camp full of rat footprints and urine

which appear each morning after the night's darkness has gone. The very same conditions a 100 years earlier, as the first world war raged on, in the exact same location individuals from lower classes fought it out, blowing each other to smithereens all so wealthier classes could expand their riches!

This is the same culture which creates the conditions for a homeless crisis and makes it socially acceptable for individuals to be left to freeze to death on streets in shop doorways in Dublin's city centre. I've seen the tent cities, the queues of soup kitchens, the desperate.

Society finds this all morally acceptable. The contradiction of civilization couldn't be any clearer, on the one hand there is riches and wealth beyond belief and on the other hand there is poverty and exploitation inflicted beyond comprehension. This is the land of despair, cruelty, and greed.

III

“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 civilization. Cultivation within the cities is another aspect of practical transition, and a further step toward superseding domestication would be a more or less random propagation of plants, a la Johnny Appleseed.” — **John Zerzan, On the Transition: Postscript to Future Primitive**

So how can this be overcome? How can the shackles placed by technological slavery be broken? There are no ready made blueprints, programs or textbooks that have the one correct way or answers. If civilization is to be overcome it will be through individuals with all sorts of diverse ideas, experiments and actions.

For me, I see my path is by attempting to achieve more individual autonomy and self-reliance away from the dependency on techno-industrial society through permacultural subsistence gardening which can provide for me, my family, and other living creatures that inhabit the area I am in.

I first learned about permaculture from reading the zine *Backwoods*. Prior to this I was focused on the horticultural method of “productive gardening”. I suppose the difference between the two is permaculture and woodland gardening is ecologically designed to give back to the soil, and benefit other living organisms, animals, and the local ecosystem in general as much as to help oneself.

It is an ecological sustainable gardening practice of growing for yourself while simultaneously helping the environment around you. Each individual organism that takes part in the process whether insects, microbe, human and non human animals, all benefit from a mutual utilisation of working together and likewise so does the organic matter and minerals which are needed to create and sustain healthy soil, which in turn when all together creates healthy gardening successions, rich landscapes, biodiversity, and healthy ecosystems.

The individual designs her garden to suit the needs of the local environment or back yard. This includes finding out soil types, and studying how much sun hits the area, where and when

different areas might be shaded. From this the individual will research what plants will suit the environmental conditions.

Perennial plants such as fruit trees and bushes combined with a mix of native annuals and self seeding annuals such as edible wild garlic, flowers like nasturtiums, soil enhancers like clover, medicinal herbs, all provide ground cover and help protect the soil from the weather, soil erosion, water retention, and provide fertilizer and mulch, which all help soil fertility, providing life to the organisms that live in and create soil. All combined help local wildlife, pollinators and other insects that are vital for a healthy garden as well as a healthy planet.

I have been gardening for the last four years and started focusing on the permaculture method last year. One does not need a lot of money to start growing. When I had a tiny backyard I used containers of old pots, buckets, and even bags. Seeds and plants can be bought cheap in the right places or else can be shoplifted easily enough. Last March I built raised beds from scaffolding planks I expropriated from a local building site which was closed due to the first lock down and started a mini forest garden on roughly a twenty foot by twenty foot strip of land. If one hasn't a backyard guerrilla gardening is a viable option.

Seeds and cuttings can be got for free in your area if you know what you are looking for. I learned about native plants from plant folklore books which were rich in folklore and mythical stories based around each plant species, included in the stories was information on edible plants and when best to forage, which ones were poisonous, and the uses of others. Combined, the stories provided a great index for subsistence. The area I live in is urban but I could still find many plants growing in parks, gardens, and the side of roads.

I'm still a long way off achieving my full subsistence needs and gardening obviously won't solve the majority of the problems that stem from civilization but I see it as a potential starting point in my own struggle for individual liberation and creating the life I want to live. I don't think gardening is for everyone either, but for me I get great enjoyment and satisfaction watching plants grow and then eating the produce, and all without having to pay or work a boring ass job for. I just have to open my door and walk outside.

I'm no expert on gardening or permaculture so I will leave a list of books that have helped me and where I got inspiration from.

Renzo Connors the Anarcho-Gardener

Reading list

Backwoods, A journal of anarchy and wortcunning.

Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard Into a Garden and Your Neighbourhood Into a Community by H.C. Flores

Gaia's Garden. A guide to home-scale permaculture by Toby Hemenway

The Permacultural City by Toby Hemenway

Forest Gardening, Rediscovering Nature and Community in a Post-Industrial Age by Robert A de J Hart

Irish Wild Plants — Myths, Legends and Folklore by Niall MacCoitir

Ireland's Trees: Myths, Legends and Folklore by Niall MacCoitir

This Ugly Civilization by Ralph Borsodi

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