

# Against agriculture & in defense of cultivation

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It doesn't take a health food nut to see that modern society has a dysfunctional relationship with food. As in almost every other arena of life, our priorities are elsewhere — if not in wage slavery and staying out of debt, then in escapist entertainment or selfnumbing addictions. Even among radicals and anarchists, healthy and mindful dietary practices are often considered a luxury reserved for that mythical post-revolutionary era that we are supposedly laying the groundwork for, when our children's children, or their children, can enjoy safe, pure, nutritious food. Sounds like a plan. Except for a few things...

While time frames are questionable, there is no denying that the current food production system is a recipe for disaster. Soils are becoming sterile, salinated and toxic, eroding into streams and poisoning irrigation and drinking waters. As is a basic natural inclination, "weeds", insects, viruses, fungi, and bacteria are adapting to each new, stranger dose of pesticide and herbicide with a vengeance/developing resistances that rival that of the pathogens resisting antibiotic drugs in medicine. The health crises resulting from the malnutrition of the industrialized west — and those outside the west who have been force fed our diets for a century or more — multiply and deepen faster than the pharmaceutical industry can develop their quick fixes.

More fundamental problems like global warming, species extinctions, and polluted waters, all of which affect agriculture and health profoundly, complicate the crisis. So when passing off the job of steering our food systems back on a path of ecological and social sanity, just what is it we are asking future generations to inherit?

## Feeding Soul, Freeing Soil

"...all of us will come back again to hoe in the ground... Or hand-adze a beam, or skin a pole, or scrape a hive — we're never going to get away from that We've been living a dream that we're going to get away from that. Put that out of our minds... That work is always going to be there."

— Gary Snyder, in *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979*

In the pre-industrial world, food was the basis of human life. If not deserving of outright ceremonial worship, then certainly food was not something just taken for granted. Sure, this was probably out of pure necessity of survival, and due to technologies in our culture we have more of a margin of error. But I have to wonder when I consider the mindlessness with which so many of us purchase, prepare, consume, and dispose of food, if the "privileges" of convenience and effortlessness

are really worth the consequences. On psychological and spiritual levels, the disconnect between our daily lives and the source of our very existence — the raw material that fuels our bodies and minds — has an effect that is both profoundly symbolic, and frighteningly real.

Most of us would agree that food is a catalyst for family and community bonds. Without it, the very fabric of our cultures comes unraveled. And we can see that happening today. We have no time to cook, and even less time to eat. Our culture's fixation on efficiency and timesaving makes it impossible for us to appreciate what goes into producing it. In our ignorance, we demand produce that is not seasonal or bioregional, the transportation of which fills 4 million trucks a year, which use \$5.5 billion worth of fuel, and spew 4 million tons of pollutants into the air. The average distance food travels from farm to fork is 1300 miles! (Rodale, 1981) We demand certain tastes at a snap of the fingers, even if it means transporting a spice thousands of miles, or using large amounts of oils pressed from genetically engineered seeds half a world away. We demand to be able to cook rice in ten minutes, which requires industrial processing that removes all the nutrients from the grain. Most meat-eaters in modern society don't ever see the animal until it ends up packaged and in the grocery store. All these "conveniences" reinforce a dangerous sense of detachment and alienation.

One of the most revealing metaphors relating to modern society's culinary dysfunction is in our dependence on processed foods. People would be more whole eating whole foods, not fragmented and refined commodities with isolated nutrients added back in. Food in its natural state evolved alongside human beings, and when obtained directly, it provides us with all we need. Food processing is an unnecessary obstacle to nutrition that benefits the long line of manufacturers, packagers and advertizers who take 90% of every food dollar, mediating our physical sustenance.

Lack of vitality is a major component of malnutrition from modern food sources. Grown in depleted soils with chemical fertilizers to mimic fertility, the plants become dependent on the chemicals to survive. Similarly, when we eat a lifetime of nutrient-depleted food our bodies become dependent on pharmaceuticals. Just like in the forest, agricultural soil health can be seen as an indicator of the health of the entire system, of which we are a part. If the soil is depleted of nutrients, so is the food that grows in it, and so are those who eat it.

## **Ancient Ways: In Defense of Cultivation**

“We cared for our corn in those days as we would care for a child;  
for we Indian people loved our gardens, just as a mother loves her

children; and we thought that our growing corn liked to hear us sing, just as children like to hear their mother sing to them.”

— Buffalo Bird Woman (Hidasta)

With a modern food system so tied to capitalism and the industrial production-oriented model, it’s hard for us to see how to feed ourselves outside of them. While it’s imperative that we look forward and adapt to our modern context to some degree, it’s by looking back to times before institutions reigned that we start to see our way out.

The erosion of traditional foodways began at different times for different cultures. A basic misconception (or perhaps miscommunication) 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”. But this simplistic analysis reflects the same reductionist logic that has led to the social diseases of modern life. What was likely a simple adaptation for survival in the face of massive climactic changes did in many cases lead people down a slippery slope toward domination of nature, but in many cultures, this was simply not the case. Even today, many indigenous cultures thrive on horticultural, village-scale food systems. At the time of white settlement of North America, dozens of Indian groups practiced such methods without the trappings of civilization. (See *Native American Gardening* by J. Bruchac and *Buffalo Bird Woman’s Garden: Agriculture of the Hidasta Indians* as told to Gilbert L. Wilson, also available online at [www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/buffalo/garden/garden.html](http://www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/buffalo/garden/garden.html))

The fact that many native cultures have endured using traditional horticultural methods, while remaining free from the trappings of civilization (aside from that which was imposed upon them) is testament to the possibilities of egalitarian social relations coexisting with the cultivation of food.

Contrary to the fundamentalist viewpoints that see cultivation itself as inherently dominating, the simple act of collecting seeds and replanting them elsewhere to provide more food sources could actually be seen as a complementary development to a gathering-hunting lifestyle. The transportation of seeds through feces is the basis of much plant reproduction in the wild and in the garden, and may have been the inspiration for humans to begin cultivating certain plants. Even the selection of certain seeds for desired traits is a way humans have actually enhanced biodiversity by “opening up” a species to diverse, highly adaptable variations. Instead of viewing the original cultivators with suspicion and doubt, why not appreciate the sensitivity and creativity it required for them to adapt to conditions by entering into a more complex and interactive relationship with nature? Can we make a distinction between cultivation and domestication?

In her book *Food in History*, Reay Tannahill theorizes that at the beginning of the “Neolithic revolution,” nomadic foragers began camping beside meadows of wild grains waiting for the brief window of ripeness when they could catch the harvest before it fell to the ground. After returning to these places annually, they eventually realized that if they left some of the grain on the stalk they could expect a heartier harvest the next year. The next logical step was to begin scattering the seeds on the ground, at which point foragers became farmers. Responding to anthropologists’ assumptions that a large labor force was then required to harvest and process grain, thus giving rise to civilization. Tannahill quotes an archaeological study from the mid 1960’s: “In a three week harvesting period, a family of six could have reaped enough wild wheat to provide them with just under a pound of grain per head per day for a whole year” (J.R. Harlan, 1967)

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.

The loss of native foodways in favor of cheap, overprocessed industrial USDA staples has uncoincidentally served as one of the many vehicles of colonialism. The disconnection of food traditions from indigenous cultures has paved the way for illnesses like diabetes, cementing their dependence on western medicine in yet another way. In the Global South, traditional cultures are losing control of their food supplies faster than ever before. Distinct and diverse peoples of the world have become a prime target for conquest by western food producers like Archer Daniels Midland and Cargill. These modern day conquistadors ride the tails of the “Green Revolution” in chemical agriculture of the 50s. After replacing traditional food practices with a cynical “development” agenda based on monocrops and cheap exports, the conquest continues as structural adjustment policies and the current biotechnology phenomenon.

The logic of biotech makes complete sense as planned obsolescence: the same corporations who pushed the Green Revolution and all its chemicals and hybrid seeds, now seek to milk more profits out of the sterile soil and resistant insects (and displaced peoples) that have resulted. New seeds are developed to adapt to the conditions that were caused by the same companies’ products 50 years ago! Decades of chemical intensive methods have created resistant weeds, so genetically

engineered seeds are designed to withstand higher doses of chemicals. Industrial agriculture depends on these methods. At this point, we either turn away from industrial methods, or we accept the fate of high-tech food.

## **Against Agriculture: Sowing the Seeds of Resistance**

For those of us conscious about the way our food choices affect others, the basic act of cutting out meat and/or dairy products, or eating only organic, feels like a huge step and is often as far as we can manage to take our concerns. But the politics of food go far beyond veganism and organics. Economic and social factors like the conditions of migrant farmworkers, or the low labor standards in most Agriculture in the global south, rarely influence our cultures' purchasing decisions. Even organic farming often reproduces many of the same ecological and economic dynamics at work in commercial farming. What about the soil erosion from over-farming huge fields, even if crops are organic? (According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, topsoil is lost on average 17 times faster than it is formed, and it takes at least 100 years to form one inch of topsoil). The use of Slaughterhouse byproducts to replace the soil lost from heavy tilling, and the overuse of "biological" fungicides and herbicides, undoubtedly maintains an imbalance in the give and take relationship that forms the basis of ecological values.

The trends toward "natural food" and "organic" are quickly being co-opted, as green businesses consolidate their power and corner markets, gobbling up profits as they go. Consequently, these concepts are losing their meaning altogether. The notion of "sustainability" has been colonized by the profit-hungry. The biotechnology industry touts the term whenever they get the chance. Of course, what they are talking about is the sustainability of profits and the dependence of farmers on them, not sustainability of ecological systems and social bonds. So when we examine the idea of sustainability we should always define what it is we are trying to sustain. If we are thinking of ecology and cultural survival, then we must remove the factors that contradict those: industrialism and capitalism, to start with.

To be against agriculture does not require advocating mass starvation or a return to an exclusively primitive or foraging existence, and it doesn't have to mean eradicating cultivated food altogether. We need to make a distinction between "agriculture" and other plant (and possibly animal, although the ethics of the domestication of animals should be viewed with suspicion) "cultivation" methods that have been, and are continuously being developed by people around the world. The problem of agriculture is largely related to the scale. "Horticulture" refers to garden-scale cultivation rather than field-scale, as in the prefix "agri". For example, permaculture is a specific cultivation method that aims to integrate the garden system into

the wild ecosystem around it. Industrial farming (even organic) places the “field” — the monocrop — outside of our immediate surroundings, removing our social lives from the polycultural, intimacy of “the garden”. Subsistence horticulture doesn’t depend on industrial systems or take more than they give back ecologically, or even 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.

When farmers in India plant a seed they pray for its endurance. But the “gene giants” have their sights trained on “terminator” technologies that break the seed’s reproductive cycle. Hybrid seeds produced in laboratory conditions are usually bred to retain certain characteristics patented by the breeder. If saved and replanted they will not show the same traits, and may turn out to be something weird and unpalatable. Open-pollinated seeds defy this controlled approach. When replanted for generations they adapt to local climate conditions, and develop a bioregionally distinct immunity. When saved for many generations they become Heirloom Seeds. For example, we have seeds that have been in circulation since Cherokee gardeners first grew and saved them hundreds of years ago, and took them on the Trail of Tears. They made their way back to the Southeast and to this day are still being passed around. The more they’re grown out, the more decentralized the seed becomes. These seeds are crucial to maintaining plant biodiversity. The reduction in varieties that comes with industrialization and capitalism has created a massive loss of genetic diversity (75% in the last century, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization), which weakens the plant’s insect blight and disease resistance, and their adaptability to changing growing conditions. The Irish potato famine was a direct result of the dependence on one variety. Breeders had to go back to the Andes to find a potato that would resist the blight. In the face of the elimination of ancient varieties in favor of more uniform crops that ship and store more efficiently, heirloom seeds are truly Seeds of Resistance. Check out *Seed to Seed* by Suzanne Ashworth for detailed instructions on seed saving.

Humanure and Greywater are traditionally used methods intended to keep nutrients in the garden ecosystem, thereby closing the circuit rather than requiring imported materials. As these methods are inherently non-capitalist and non-industrial, it would not be possible to adopt these practices (or to return to them, depending on how we look at it) beyond just a small privileged minority, within the capitalist market or the industrial model. True sustainability actually requires the subversion of those institutions.

On a personal level, we can take steps to re-establish foodways in our cultures by learning about our food, discovering what foods grow where and in what season — and where those foods originated. We should know where our food comes from and seek out food grown locally. We can seek out those with traditional

knowledge, learn how to cook with whole foods, then teach others. We can learn about the wild edible plants that grow around us, and about the ancestral people who ate and propagated those foods. This knowledge provides us with an essential missing component that early horticultuialists combined with cultivation. (A great reference is the work of Steve Brill, an urban wild plant forager in New York City: [www.wildmanstevebrill.com](http://www.wildmanstevebrill.com)). Challenge your taste buds to appreciate foods in their natural state, and replace the junk foods you crave with natural sweets and snacks.

Reconnecting with our food goes beyond the personal. Taking food out of the capitalist market means reintegrating ourselves with the processes of growing food – whether that means getting to know local farmers and buying from them, getting involved in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or a food co-op, going to farmers markets, or even better – growing your own. These options increase the security of our access to healthy food, lessening our dependence on the market. In urban areas this can be much more challenging, but all the more rewarding if you can challenge the obstacles. For some inspiring examples of urban food security check out [Www.foodsecurity.org](http://Www.foodsecurity.org). The Hartford Food System in Hartford, CT ([www.hartfordfood.org](http://www.hartfordfood.org)) and The Food Project in Massachusetts ([www.thefoodproject.org](http://www.thefoodproject.org)) are amazing examples of urban food security ] that truly challenge the class structures that keep people dependent on Agriculture.

The challenge of feeding ourselves ! sustainably might be the fundamental question for our future survival. There is not one path forward out of this mess, but many possible options, and we'll have to make up a lot of it as we go. But our paths will be totally new and unique. Learning from the mistakes and the successes of the past is crucial to bringing the modern world back in direct relationship with nature, and the life-support systems on which we depend. We should celebrate the opportunity we have to examine and analyze what has worked and what has compromised our freedoms and our health, and move toward post-industrial and post-capitalist models of sustenance. Rather than an afterthought of social revolution, reclaiming truly sustainable foodways could itself be a catalyst for challenging the deep alienation of our modern world.

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