

Agrarian Environmentalism and the Nature of the State

Jake P. Greear



Introduction

The most straightforward case of a violent, post-colonial eco-revolution in the world is probably the three-decade-old conflict on the Island of Bougainville, some 900 miles northeast of Australia. Dubbed the “Coconut Revolution,” this conflict began when dispossessed native Bougainvilleans over-ran and shut down Panguna Mine, which at the time was the world’s largest copper mine, operated by Rio Tinto Zinc. Its significant profits enriched Western stockholders and was the main source of funding for the government of Papua New Guinea,

which encompassed Bougainville Island. A small proportion of the profits were used for local “development”—providing rudimentary housing for native Bougainvillean workers and substandard educational facilities for their children. These benefits and the meagre wages paid to workers came to be seen as an insult added to the broader injuries of colonization and the ecological devastation of the island traditionally called “Mekamui.” After their demand for \$10 billion in reparations was denied, the indigenous rebel faction expelled the foreign mine operators and defeated the Papua New Guinea Defense Forces, despite their being aided by the Australian Military and industry-backed private military contractors. The war took on the character of a civil war to some degree, and it was very bloody.

Today, thirty years later, the fighting has stopped, but the struggle is still unresolved. The mine remains closed, with roads blocked by rebel hold-outs who still carry guns, but even some Bougainvilleans who took part in the struggle want to see the mine re-opened. The official position of the newly formed Bougainville Autonomous Government is that it should be reopened, this time under terms more favorable to Bougainvilleans in general, and to the traditional land-owners of Southern Bougainville in particular. Talks with Rio Tinto are currently underway. Bougainville is very poor, and the mine, says the current president, is the only way to develop Bougainville’s economy. And yet, while few Bougainvilleans seem to be insensitive to the advantages “development” promises, many continue to oppose reopening the mine on principle, regardless of the terms and conditions, regardless of the benefits.

The situation on Bougainville is an interesting case study in post-colonial environmental politics, and one in which the ideological battle lines seem to be starkly drawn. The viewpoint opposing the mine is summed up by an elderly Bougainvillean who is featured in one of several

short documentaries posted on Youtube and other public media platforms, which are apparently produced by the anti-mining faction. The man holds up a small corn plant, which he seems to regard as a crucial visual aid, as he speaks.

“I am not happy to hear BCL [he subsidiary of Rio Tinto Zinc] is coming back. BCL has destroyed our land and taken the minerals from the ground. In the law of nature God set [or said], we survive from food that we get from plant life, plants get food from minerals in the ground. BCL returning means they will destroy more of our land, and our children will suffer. If government wants to develop Bougainville, focus on agriculture.”¹

The speaker here stakes out a quintessentially agrarian position on questions of environmental ethics and political economy. It is agriculture, from this perspective, that obeys God’s law, and upholds and enacts the order of nature. The mine, on the other hand, contravenes that law and quite literally undermines the natural order. The speaker invokes God, and also implores consideration of “our children.” Of course the war that closed the mine was an ungodly horror, as all wars are, and it took the lives of thousands of Bougainvillean men, women, and children. But even without theological or humanitarian considerations, the agrarian perspective seems to carry its own moral force. In spite of its being a motivation for armed struggle in this case, agrarianism speaks a language of innocence, piety, peace, honesty, sustainability, and solidarity with nature and Life itself.

This paper explores agrarianism as a mode of environmental political critique through four sections. The first section examines the merits of the “new-agrarian” environmental

¹ Video retrieved on March 18, 2019 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv8Q5hH0cys>

movement, largely through the thought of Wendell Berry, and engages the criticism that this movement is handicapped by a fundamentally apolitical focus on private virtue. The second draws on Anthony Marx and others to trace the problems and the promise of contemporary agrarianism to their Western roots in Virgil and Hesiod. The third section draws on James Scott and recent scholarship in archaeology to argue that agrarian political critique as well as the agrarian environmental aesthetic are rooted in the political ecology of the earliest states, and particularly the production of “rural space” that attends them. The final section compares and contrasts two visions of nature within contemporary environmental consciousness: agrarian nature and nature-as-wilderness. I argue that agrarian nature is “the nature of the state,” but is not to be disvalued on that basis.

Agrarian environmentalism

The anti-mining faction of Bougainville Island would find many ideological allies among contemporary environmentalists in the developed West/global North. “New Agrarianism” is now a prominent movement and discourse in Western environmentalism, and one which has developed significant linkages to the environmental movements of the Global Periphery. The *Movimiento Sin Tierra* in Brazil, the Greenbelt movement in East Africa, the Chipko and rivers movements in India, as well as various anti-mining movements from the Philippines to Peru, all share a general agrarian vision, and through the work of leaders like Vandana Shiva and Wangari Mathai, movements such as these have forged intellectual and political connections with Western

environmentalists such as Wendell Berry, Joel Salatan, Paul Thompson, Bill McKibben, and many others.

Agrarian environmentalism is promising in its potential to forge linkages between “majority and minority world” environmental movements, to borrow Timothy Doyle’s (2005) phrase. It also seems very timely as a mode of eco-critique, because the modes of life and systems of values traditionally criticized by agrarianism are no longer just potentially corrupting forces within the human world; they are now forces threatening civilizational collapse, ecological catastrophe, and global destruction. James Montmarquet offers the following definition of agrarianism: “In its weakest sense we may take 'agrarianism' to assert merely that agriculture is an honorable (and virtuous) way of life; much more contentiously, the agrarian may assert that this is the most honorable way of life, or at least that it is morally superior to ways of life dedicated to typical urban pursuits” (Montmarquet 2001). To put a finer point on it, agrarianism often favorably contrasts the agricultural way of life with a series of disfavored alternatives. For pre-modern agrarians these included warfare, commerce, and politics. In the modern context we could include a skepticism toward industrial manufacturing, science and technology, and a hostility to extractive industry. In other words, agrarianism stands against much of what goes under the names of capitalism and the state. Moreover, the mode of life that agrarians celebrate bears the signal hallmark of our salvation: *sustainability*. To be sure, the history of agriculture is a history of artifice, oppression, and sometimes environmental degradation. But at least in principle agriculture works with and within in the renewable energy cycles of the biosphere.

If an agrarian approach to environmentalism holds significant promise, Wendell Berry deserves particular attention as one of its its foremost proponents, and by some accounts the founder of this approach, in the American context. Since he began writing on agrarian topics a half century ago, Berry has argued for a revival of an agrarian society based on the largely self-sufficient family farm, which he regards as a basis not only for social and spiritual health, but also for an ecologically viable economy. For Berry, the ecological importance of the family farm lies its functioning as a crucial point of affective contact and ethical interchange between human civilization and the ecosystems that support it. The replacement of the family farm by large agribusiness corporations in the 20th century severs this crucial affective and ethical linkage between people and the land, fundamentally altering the functional interface between humanity and nature. Corporations driven almost solely by the short-term profit motive have become humanity's proxies, replacing the arguably much more complex set of motivations and imperatives that had structured the interactions between traditional farmers and the land for thousands of years. And "the land" here must be understood quite literally. Over half of the solid surface of the earth is dedicated to some form of agriculture.² When systematic global changes, even subtle ones, occur within the agricultural sector, therefore, the potential geophysical impact is enormous. As Berry argues at length in numerous essays, the changes that have taken place over the last century in the agricultural sector have not been subtle; and that they can be characterized fundamentally as a shift from farming as cultivation to farming as mining. Soils are mined for their nutrients, their water conserving and carbon sequestering capabilities are diminished, and the potential losses to the corporations are prevented by mining fertilizers,

² See Chapter One of Paul B. Thompson's *The Agrarian Vision* (2010).

mining fossil fuels to synthesize fertilizers, and mining water from rapidly depleting aquifers. The results are diminished long-term food production capacity and pollution of water, soil, and air. Contemporary industrial agriculture, in this sense, has more in common with the copper mine on Bougainville Island than it does with what used to be called farming.

Critics of Berry and of other agrarian environmentalists have pointed out that in a rapidly urbanizing world of 7 billion people, it is fatuous to pretend that everyone can become self-sufficient farmers. Over half of the people on the planet live in cities, and that percentage is growing. Arguments can be made, moreover, that urban dwellers use fewer resources and contribute less overall to negative ecological impacts, at least in industrialized countries.³ Agrarian environmentalism is, however, not rendered obsolete by an urbanizing world. A transformation of the food economy, and the kind of “rehabilitation of the landscape” that Berry has continually advocated would entail changed patterns of production, consumption, and dwelling practices in both urban and non-urban environments. Suburbs could be replaced by productive urban agricultural geographies, more densely populated walkable “mini-cities,” or re-ruralized communities of small farms. Larger cities could become more densely populated and more starkly divided from nearby rural hinterlands, on which they may more closely depend for food. These trends are already occurring in some places, and are associated with economic, social, and environmental benefits. (Benfield 2014)

Significant among the benefits of such an urban-friendly, neo-agrarian transition is the potential for mitigating global warming. Organic and sustainable farming practices—such as

³ A synopsis of data for the United States bearing on this question is available from Mother Nature Network: <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/translating-uncle-sam/stories/urban-or-rural-which-is-more-energy-efficient>

poly-cropping, green manuring, no-till planting, an avoidance of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers—are known to be ecologically advantageous. If these techniques were to be applied to all of the world’s cultivated and grazed land, a recent study indicates that the building of topsoil and soil organic matter alone could store as much carbon each year as what is emitted by the global transportation sector. (Zomer et al. 2017) The economic roadblock to these agricultural practices is the cost of labor. Farming practices that build carbon-rich soils, keep waterways clean, and contribute to domesticated and wild species diversity, are probably only around 20% less efficient (in the near-term economic sense of efficiency) in terms of production per acre (Lesur-Dumoulin et al. 2017). The more significant difference lies in how much labor is required per unit of agricultural output when the best ecological farming practices are employed. This “drawback” is, however, likely to become a benefit as global unemployment trends begin to impose increasing social and economic costs on advanced industrial economies. As with green energy, the labor-intensiveness of sustainable agriculture is likely to soon be seen as a mark in its favor.

Ultimately such a new agrarian transition will, according to Berry, rely upon a transformation of consciousness at the individual level. Berry has often expressed a “distrust of movements,” even penning one essay with that very title. For Berry, the needed changes must come from the ground up, not from experts, not from leaders, and not from some “political bunch” (Berry 1970, 87). “One must begin in one’s own life the private solutions,” Berry writes, “that can only *in turn* become public solutions.” (Berry 1977, 23) Berry actually has almost nothing to say about what such public solutions might look like, even if the private changes were to come about en masse. Politics, and even political activism, for Berry seem to intrude as a

polluting substance on the ethical moorings provided by the fundamentally private, place-centered, agrarian form of life he extols. As one commentator recently wrote, “It is not simply that the personal is political; for Berry, there is no other political.” (Major 2013, 31) That the contemporary sustainable food movement largely shares in this individualistic, moralistic, and arguably apolitical approach is evident in the way this movement has largely degenerated in popular culture to mere green consumerism.

This apoliticality is a significant handicap to the new agrarian environmentalist movement. While Berry and others have helped inspire a global movement, the movement remains marginal and limited. As Nora Hannigan has recently argued in a Deweyan critique of Berry, truly moving the now globalized system of industrial agriculture toward a neo-agrarian vision of sustainability will likely require organized resistance, civil disobedience, political coalition building, and the implementation of economic and environmental policies at the local, regional, national, and perhaps even global level. (Hanagan, 2015) Given the political aporia within the thought of one of the most influential agrarian environmentalist writers, it is worthwhile to explore the larger tradition of agrarian thought, and how its aesthetic and ethical naturalism is related to its engagement with politics and to the state itself. It is to this deeper history of agrarian thought that I turn in the following sections.

Agrarianism, georgic, and pastoral

It may be a sensible supposition that prior to the modern age, and the comforts it supplies, farming was such a toilsome reality and such a universal imperative, that no one would ever

think to extoll its merits. But in fact, agrarianism is an ancient mode of thought, discernible, if only as a minor tradition, in the oldest known literatures, religions, and philosophies. If we understand agrarianism as a broad category of political and social critique, it has two recognized aspects in the Western literary tradition: pastoral and georgic. Pastoral can be traced back to the Greek bucolic poetry of Theocritus and celebrates agrarian settings as a site of leisure, innocence, peace, and harmony. The georgic mode can be traced back at least as far as Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Georgic poetry and prose also celebrates rural landscapes and lifeways, but does so through a didactic form. While both modes have Greek origins, it was the Roman poet, Virgil, who drew upon these precursors to inaugurate these genres with his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, respectively.

Exactly how agrarianism, pastoral, and georgic are related and differentiated is a matter on which scholars differ. Leo Marx (1964,5) and Lawrence Buell (1995, 439) are two literary theorists who essentially make agrarian political thought a species or instance of pastoral. Timothy Sweet (2002, 2), however, proposes an expansive sense of georgic—as all literature that is dedicated primarily to negotiating the human interaction with nature—that would encompass agrarian political thought, and probably pastoral literature as well. For Montmarquet (1985), a philosopher, pastoral and georgic seem to be subsumed under a general conception of philosophical agrarianism. Here, I adopt the semantic structure suggested by Montmarquet and understand pastoral and georgic as the two key tributaries in the history of agrarian thought.

In Leo Marx's influential reading, the Virgilian pastoral is centered on an ideal subject position represented by the shepherd inhabiting a “middle landscape”—neither city nor wilderness. He writes,

To arrive at this haven it is necessary to move away from Rome [the City] in the direction of nature. But the centrifugal motion stops short of unimproved raw nature. [...] This ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders: one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland. It is a place where Tityrus is spared the deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness. [...] Virgil quickly itemizes the solid satisfactions of the pastoral retreat: peace, leisure, and economic sufficiency. The key to all of these felicities is the harmonious relation between Tityrus and the natural environment. It is a serene partnership. (Marx 1964, 22-3)

The significance of the pastoral tradition to contemporary environmental consciousness is acknowledged in the distinction made by Donald Worster (1994) between “Arcadian ecology” and “Imperial ecology” as the two principal and opposed approaches to nature in Western modernity. And indeed, environmentalists may plausibly see the georgic tradition as antithetical to ecological thought, as it portends the exploitative, anthropocentric ethos of industrial modernity, bending and harnessing nature to the human will. Perhaps it is not surprising, though, that some ecologically oriented literary theorists have recently resurrected an “ecological georgic,” arguing that the pastoral alternative trades upon an overly sentimental, romantic, and fantastical aestheticization of nature, packaged for urban consumption, and therefore provides little of value to contemporary ecological thought. Georgic, on the other hand, may, according to these scholars, ground an environmental ethic in a more pragmatic, engaged, and authentic appreciation for the natural world. (Ziser 2004, Fairer 2011, Sweet 20) One might likewise suspect that a georgic perspective would offer resources for a more hard-headed mode political engagement. These juxtapositions may, however, gloss over the commonalities between these two literary modes which is evident in a close reading of Hesiod.

The poetry of Hesiod's *Works and Days* is often taken as the first instance of georgic verse, but in spite of the distinctions often drawn, it shares many commonalities with Virgil's *Eclogues*. In Hesiod we find a convergence (or perhaps a common origin) of democratic political critique, practical agricultural wisdom, and a certain naturalistic ethic and aesthetic. Although a significant portion of the poem is framed as a compendium of practical wisdom for the yeoman farmer—which also functions as backhanded moral advice to Hesiod's estranged brother, Perses—the primary importance of Hesiod for most classicists lies not in any advancements in the agricultural arts, nor in the sick burn dished up for Perses, but rather in the radical break with the Homeric, warrior-aristocratic ethos that the poem represents.⁴ Hesiod celebrates work over war, he exalts the small farmer over the sea-faring merchants and “bribe-swallowing lords,” and he sides with humble victims against the predatory military class. In these ways, Hesiod's poetry is ultimately a critique of the State, such as it existed in early iron age Greece. Like Virgil's *Eclogues*, Hesiod's narrative functions to place a deliberate distance between the central sympathetic figure—here the yeoman farmer—and the centers of political power: city, court, or polis.

The subject position of innocence that Hesiod's virtuous and pious yeoman occupies is established by his proximity to and interactions with non-human beings and forces of nature. A naturalistic aesthetic is conveyed along with the poem's political critique through the didactic form and the agrarian content of the latter half of the poem. In a series of proverbial prescriptions mainly concerning husbandry, tillage, and viticulture, Hesiod artfully depicts his own pastoral ideal of the prosperous farmstead situated within a natural environment that is neither fully wild

⁴ See for example Victor Hansen, *The Other Greeks* and Levi Bryant, “Military technology and socio-political change in ancient Greece.”

nor fully controlled or artificial. As Stephanie Nelson points out, Hesiod's text notably marks no normative distinction between wild and domesticated nature.⁵ Harmony between the agriculturalist and nature is not depicted through musical metaphors and themes of leisure and interpersonal harmony, as in the Eclogues, but it is nonetheless a central theme. For Hesiod, as for Berry, this harmony is depicted in terms of work, which, when properly carried out, is justly rewarded by a theistically ordered cosmos.

Both the naturalistic aesthetic and the political critique in Hesiod's agrarianism are part and parcel of a valuation of private over public life, and a vision of the virtuous individual next to which any vision of a virtuous community is secondary if not altogether neglected. Human community is not absent from Hesiod's agrarian imagery, but the agrarian society depicted is remarkably individualistic. The nuclear family is the basic unit of society, and Hesiod famously portends *laissez-faire* economic theory in celebrating the industriousness that results from a kind of "harmony of discord"—when farmer competes with farmer, blacksmith with blacksmith, and so on. Like Berry's agrarianism and Virgil's pastoral, Hesiod's work bears a political critique that is arguably fundamentally democratic and a resonant vision of harmony with nature, but also a remarkable devaluation of politics itself. In light of these common themes in the long tradition of agrarian thought, it may be helpful to reflect on the relationship between agriculture, nature, and the state at a yet more fundamental level, and in a yet more ancient historical context. Toward this end the next section briefly surveys current research on the relationship between agriculture and political power in the emergence of the earliest states.

⁵ Stephanie Nelson's *God and the Land, The Metaphysics of Farming in Virgil and Hesiod*, generally informs my reading of Hesiod.

Ruralization in early states

Agriculture, and particularly grain agriculture, arose independently in a few regions around the world over the last 10,000 years—relatively recently if we consider the roughly 200,000 year history of anatomically modern humans. The first states arise even more recently—only about 5,000 years ago. The classical tradition of western political thought, from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Hobbes and Locke, suggested that fear of violence and the desire for security were key to the logic of state formation. States, that is, arise as defensive alliances. However, most modern theories about the origins of the state have considered the advent of agriculture to be closely associated with it. These two lines of reasoning are not mutually exclusive. The intensive cultivation of cereal grains *could* lead to state formation precisely because settled grain-rich communities needed to provide for the common defense against raiders from the outside who sought to enjoy the fruits without the labor. However, agriculture could also lead to the state for non-security-related reasons. It could be simply that grain production led to population increases in sedentary societies, which then leads “naturally” to state formation as population density rises to a certain “critical mass.” Other theories connecting agriculture to state formation include the idea that the state arose to organize complex irrigation systems and distribute water rights, or because grain storage and distribution necessitated a similar organizational system.

Archeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence indicates, however, that agriculture does not lead inexorably to state formation any more than patterns of intergroup violence do. James C. Scott makes a point of this in his recent book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2003). A key insight of the book is that there were, in the ancient world at least, no yam or taro states. Root crops did not lend themselves to taxation, centralized storage and

large scale redistribution, and therefore, wherever root crops became the dominant agricultural staple, the state did not arise. (Scott 2018) Cereal agriculture therefore appears to be a necessary antecedent to the earliest states.⁶ But even if necessary, cereal agriculture is no more an efficient cause of the earliest states than warfare. As Scott points out, settled cereal-growing communities predate the earliest states by at least a few millennia. (Scott 2018) Grain agriculture, while it may be necessary to the earliest states, does not in any meaningful sense “lead to” the state.

This is evidenced in the fertile crescent, where there appears to have been a flowering and then a decline of what archaeologists have begun to call "mega-villages" during the three or four millennia after the advent of agriculture but prior to the appearance of the first states in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The largest of these mega-villages yet discovered is at the site of Çatalhöyük in modern-day Turkey. We could call the Çatalhöyük settlement a “city” based on population size and density. At its height, about 9,000 years ago, it housed over 10,000 people in close proximity.⁷ And yet, in spite of what was clearly a settled society with some degree of agricultural surplus, there exists in the archaeological record, which spans over two thousand years of near-continuous occupation, no evidence of any social stratification, no monumental architecture, no ceremonial center, no centralized grain storage. In fact, there is no centralized anything. Cities of comparable population size and even lower densities in the Classic Mayan or early Mesopotamian civilization could, by contrast, make claims to full-fledged city-state-hood, with ruling monarchs, a hierarchy of social classes, and bureaucratic organizations, all abundantly evidenced in the archaeological record. The architectural contrast between these city-states and the Çatalhöyük mega-village is striking. Houses at Çatalhöyük were all of comparable

⁶ The Incan Empire and earlier Andean civilizations are a conspicuous counter-example, as food agriculture there was based largely on potatoes. As Flannery and Marcus (2012) have recently observed, the Andes is where theories of state-formation go to die.

⁷ Ian Hodder’s *The Leopard’s Tale* (2011) is an authoritative introduction to Çatalhöyük

size, and were built directly adjacent to one another. Doorways were in the ceiling, and rooftops were the only thoroughfares, giving the settlement a honeycomb-like structure. (Hodder, 2011)

That such late neolithic mega-villages arose, prospered, expanded, developed technologically, and persisted for many centuries before dispersing, indicates not only that a certain kind of “urbanism” can persist without bureaucratic organization, but also that densely populated, settled societies that are at least partially agricultural can arise and persist for long periods without becoming states. However, while the earliest states did not invent agriculture, and while agriculture does not produce states with any linear regularity, the state form does have a special relationship with farming, and in almost every case states transformed and expanded agriculture in sociologically significant ways.

According to Norman Yoffee, a leading scholar of early state formation, one of the dramatic effects of the appearance of the first city-states is what he calls the “ruralization” of the surrounding landscape.

For many of the earliest cities, the urban demographic implosion was accompanied by an equally important creation of the countryside. This process of ruralization can be observed in two dimensions. First, existing towns and villages became networked to urban places. The social and economic roles of non-urban dwellers were tied to decisions made in the cities; specialized institutions of production and consumption in the countryside (e.g. T. J. Wilkinson 2003) were altered by the demands of urban rulers and elites, and ranks of urban officials were conceived precisely to carry out new activities. Second, countrysides became relatively depopulated as many people became incorporated in the new cities, [...] Subsequently new villages, towns and hamlets arose in the backdraft of urbanization. This condition also led to the intensification of specialized activities, such as pastoralism and nomadism, which flourished not only to supply goods and services to cities but also served as refuges for urban flight. (Yoffee 2005, 60)

Ruralization in the Mesopotamian context, for example, entailed the geographical expansion of a relatively intensively cultivated and irrigated agricultural hinterland, mainly extending upstream and downstream from the city-states. Some workers would have made daily pilgrimages, orchestrated by leaders, from the city to work the nearer fields. But farther out there would have been small settlements of agricultural workers, and further afield still the isolated, semipermanent habitations of herders and perhaps some outlying farmers.

Almost all early states depended upon agricultural surplus,⁸ and similar patterns of ruralization can be discerned in other early-emerging civilizations.⁹ In this ruralized space surrounding the early states we can discern interesting patterns of difference from the agricultural space of non-state societies. Prior to the advent of city-states in Mesopotamia, populations were concentrated in small but densely populated villages, and cultivation was generally carried on in close proximity to these settlements (Scott 2018). This is a pattern that is also discernible in contemporary non-state agricultural societies, in the highlands of Indonesia for example.

The density of very small village settlements in non-state or pre-state societies may be explained by simple human sociality. However, as the transitional villages of the late Neolithic

⁸ According to Bruce Trigger, Between 70% and 90% of available labor had to be devoted to food production, leaving precious little surplus to be exploited by ruling classes. (Trigger 2003) Possible exceptions to James Scott's "grain-states-only" thesis would include the Chico Valley civilizations in Peru and Calusa in south Florida, both of which show hierarchical and proto-bureaucratic characteristics and seem to have been based mostly on marine foraging rather than grain agriculture.

⁹ That the state form produces a specific kind of space, both physically and phenomenologically, is a point that philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari allude to extensively in *Milles Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus)*. They refer to state space as "striated space." Conversely, non state space—particularly the space of nomadic societies—they call "smooth space." The sense of this conceptual distinction is most apparent in the physical architecture of the earliest cities-states. Modern cities are in fact far more organic—more village-like—than the most ancient urban spaces, which are highly planned, carefully oriented, often with sophisticated astrological considerations, and elaborated with rectilinear and symmetrical architectural motifs. On the cosmological architecture of early cities, see also Kevin Lynch, *Good City Form* (1981). It is the agricultural landscapes of early state territories, however, which afford the principle example for Deleuze and Guattari, as the land is physically striated with the plow, but also orchestrated and taxed according to grid-like or tree-like conceptual schemas overlaid on the farming populations and agricultural territories by governments. The degree to which and the manner in which the "striating vision" of the state affects farmers' own experience of rural space, however, may be a different matter.

become larger and more reliant on cultivation, the density or "nucleation" of these settlements may require additional explanation. With other considerations aside, the more dispersed dwellings and smaller hamlets, characteristic of later ruralized territories have practical advantages for farmers. Violence and insecurity likely provide at least a partial explanation for these nucleated pre-state settlement patterns. Even in the case of Çatalhöyük, which is otherwise conspicuously devoid of any evidence of violence, some archaeologists have speculated that the extreme density of this populous settlement, and the architectural peculiarity of rooftop entrances, may suggest a society that lived in fear of hostile outsiders. Whether or not this is the case, many other similar neolithic farming villages show evidence of rudimentary defensive fortifications, often separating dwellings from the fields.

Archaeological evidence from the North American proto-state of Cahokia (circa 1000 CE) indicates the dynamics that may have generally characterized the transformation from pre-state agricultural villages to a ruralized landscape under the dominion of early states. Shortly after the building and settlement of Cahokia, the patterns of settlement in the surrounding areas, apparently even including areas quite distant from the city, changed significantly as violence subsided and agriculture intensified.¹⁰ Fortified villages, which entail dense nucleated clusters of often communal dwellings, were replaced by settlements without defensive palisades, consisting of what seem to be single-family "spatially discrete farmsteads situated on bottomland ridge crests and slopes." (Milner 1986, 228) This relatively pacified, "ruralized" Mississippian space

¹⁰ Erik E. Browne, in *Mound Sites of the Ancient South*, writes, "In the decades before 900 AD, many people in the region had been forced to live behind stockade walls due to endemic violence." (63) Whereas, excavations in the outlying areas downstream of Cahokia indicate that during the heyday of this proto-state, "settlements consisted of spatially discrete farmsteads situated on bottomland ridge crests and slopes." (Milner 1986, citing Milner 1984) And Timothy Pauketat, in *Cahokia: America's Great City on the Mississippi*, writes of the demise of the "Cahokian peace," "Without the mantle of Cahokian peace covering the Mississippi, village based tensions and ethnic level tensions re-emerging, with squadrons of warriors prowling the landscape and with one village's warriors fighting those of other villages." (Pauketat 2009)

was coeval with an intensification of agriculture. It appears to have persisted only for a short time—a period of one or two hundred years, which some have referred to as the *Pax Cahokiana*, after which Cahokia declined as a political power. As it did so, rival chiefdoms arose throughout the greater Mississippi valley, and a period of generalized hostility resumed characterized by inter-polity, inter-ethnic, and inter-village conflict. (Pauketat 2009)

According to Bruce Trigger, in his influential *Understanding Early Civilizations* (2005), a similar dynamic is indicated in the evolution of the Incan Empire, which had enough of a pacifying influence in the Andean valleys to allow farmers to expand into what had been unoccupied hinterlands at higher elevations. “The Inka state,” he writes, “greatly benefitted highland farmers, by abolishing local warfare, thus permitting them to leave their hill-forts and resettle near the thirty-five-hundred-meter-line where they could grow the widest possible array of crops.” (Trigger 2003, 300) These cases indicate that pacification is one of the mechanisms at work in the “ruralization” that Yoffee points to, and which he shows is widespread in the archaeological record, not only in the Mesopotamian context, but also in many other sites of early state emergence, including Wari (a pre-Inca Andean state), and the pre-Aztec metropolis of Teotihuacan. (Yoffee 2005, 52)

With these observations, I do not intend to adopt an uncritical attitude to the state. If anything, I am sympathetic with the normative thrust of Scott’s book, “Against the Grain” which is to say, against the state. However, my aim in this section is not to adjudicate the merits or demerits of early states or even the state form of society in general. At least not directly. Rather, what interests me is what we might call the environmental hermeneutics of the early state. That is, how might the experience of the landscape and the perception of the landscape change under these changing conditions, as the landscape itself is changed and occupied differently? What I

want to suggest is that there is a particular vision and experience of “nature” that is peculiar to agrarianism in both its ancient and modern versions, and in both its literary and political aspects, and that this agrarian “nature,” while antagonistic to the state, may be fundamentally also produced by the state. The following section seeks to further explicate and explore this agrarian “nature of the the state.”

Nature alienation: agrarian and wilderness perspectives

Western environmental theorists have often postulated a significant break in human consciousness of the natural world at the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. As Max Oelshlager writes,

“The onset of Neolithic culture forever altered both intellectual and material culture [...] Rather than attempting to live in harmony with wild nature, as hunter-gatherers had done since time immemorial, farmers literally rose up and attempted to dominate the wilderness. Boundaries were drawn between the natural and the cultural and conceptual restructuring was inevitable.” (Oelshlager 1991, 28)

Deep ecology's “back to the Pleistocene” rallying cry is based on this view of things. As Earthfirst founder Dave Foreman writes,

“Before agriculture was midwived in the Middle East, humans were in the wilderness. We had no concept of “wilderness” because everything was wilderness and *we were part of it*. But with irrigation ditches, crop surpluses, and permanent villages we became *apart from* the natural world. ...Between

the wilderness that created us and the civilization created by us grew an ever-widening rift. (Foreman, quoted in Cronon 1996)

This view of a Neolithic fall from ecological grace is not confined to twentieth century deep ecology. Timothy Morton, who professes a post-natural approach to eco-criticism that is ostensibly at odds with Oelschlager's and Foreman's defense of wilderness, nevertheless comes to much the same conclusion, arguing that the advent of agriculture erected a "massive firewall between humans and nonhumans." (*Being Ecological*, 59) For Morton, the Neolithic moment of our separation from what he would call "non-human otherness" (rather than "wilderness") is marked by the emergence of the very concept of "nature." Therefore, the deep ecologists' project of reconnecting with wilderness is only a late-coming symptom of this rudimentary alienation, not a cure for it. The only real difference, though, between the deep ecology viewpoint and Morton's own lies in the characterization of that from which humans became alienated after they started farming.

Agrarian environmentalism offers a clearly distinct account of nature-alienation, which perhaps entails a distinct conceptualization of nature itself. Here it is not the transition *to* farming that marks a crucial turning point in environmental subjectivity, but the later transition *away from* an agrarian mode of life and into industrial modernity. Wendell Berry is a prominent proponent of this view. "The word 'agriculture,'" he writes,

means "cultivation of land." And *cultivation* is at the root of the sense both of *culture* and of *cult*. The ideas of tillage and worship are thus joined in culture. And these words all come from an Indo-European root meaning both 'to revolve' and 'to dwell.' To live, to survive on the earth, to care for the soil, and to worship, all are bound at the root to the idea of a cycle. (1977, 87)

At some point, though,

The Wheel of Life became an industrial metaphor; rather than turning in place, revolving in order to dwell, it began to roll on the “highway of progress” toward an ever-receding horizon. The idea, the responsibility, of return weakened and disappeared from agricultural discipline. Henceforth, *any* resource would be regarded as an ore. (2002, 287)

Martin Heidegger came to similar conclusions about the environmental merits of what he would have thought of as “peasant life.” To live on the land and carry on the quiet, cyclical labors of subsistence farming, for Heidegger, is the very essence of being-in-the-world, or existence within an immediate environment.¹¹ Modern science and technology, urban existence, and mass society, on the other hand, represented for him an existential separation from nature, environment, or lifeworld. Lynn White Jr. also offered a variant of the agrarian account of nature alienation, arguing that the introduction of the heavy plow in Northern Europe around 900 CE marks the crucial turning point in the Western relationship to nature. (White 1967)

Contemporary eco-Marxists provide yet another articulation of the agrarian environmentalist version of the nature-alienation narrative, which is based on the Marxian concept of the “metabolic rift” inherent in capitalist modes of production. According to John Bellamy Foster et al. (2011), the pioneering work of chemist Justus von Liebig on the cycling of nitrogen and phosphorous had drawn the attention of Marx, who came to understand that

¹¹ This basic narrative is arguably discernible thought Heidegger’s corpus, but see especially Heidegger’s short essay titled “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” in Heidegger, 2006. *Philosophical and Political Writings*, edited by Manfred Stassen. New York: Continuum International.

capitalist production interrupted these cycles; the agricultural products of increasingly industrialized farms were transported over ever longer distances into cities, to be consumed by growing populations of urban workers, resulting in twin problems of urban pollution and rural soil depletion.¹² Other eco-Marxists inspired by Foster et al. have expanded the logic of the metabolic rift to consciously attend to not only the rift in material flows, but also the concomitant rift or rupture in the flows of “sensuous knowledge” that had connected small-scale agriculturalists to land and environment.¹³ In this view, the metabolic rift in matter/energy flows under capitalist production was also and at the same time a “knowledge rift” and an “epistemic rift” at the root of the general ecological blindness of bourgeois modernity. Similar to the accounts of Berry and Heidegger, here it is the pre-capitalist farmer—whether peasant, yeoman, or communard—whose relationship to nature manifests the basic ingredients of ecological harmony and integrity.

Both the agrarian and wilderness versions of the nature alienation narrative may be questioned. Although arguable, it is not obvious that stabbing animals to death with stone-tipped spears or burning forests to create game openings is a more harmonious mode of relation to the non-human world than slashing and burning and planting manioc or tending established farmlands. Furthermore, there is much overlap between mobile foraging societies and farming societies, both historically and among contemporary non-state societies. The earliest agrarians certainly combined farming with hunting and foraging. In Neolithic farming villages in the fertile

¹² Capitalism has found ways to temporarily live with these issues. The depletion problem was eventually addressed by the fossil-energy-intensive Haber-Bosch process of industrial fertilizer production, while the pollution problem would be addressed by ad hoc technological solutions to sewage management, which are still today falling short of solving an ever-growing pollution problem.

¹³ See Mindi Schneider, and Philip McMichael, “Deepening, and Repairing, the Metabolic Rift,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 461–484. See also Ivan Scales, “Green Consumption, Ecolabelling and Capitalism’s Environmental Limits,” *Geography Compass* 8, no. 7 (2014): 477–489.

crescent, artifacts arguably suggest more cultural continuity with the Paleolithic hunters who painted the walls of Lascaux cave than with their fellow farmers in the early city-states of Mesopotamia. Indeed, the rise of the state itself may be a more significant and decisive moment in the history of environmental consciousness than origin of sedentism and agriculture.

But, rather than marking a break with nature, the advent of the state may be seen as producing nature—in the sense of bringing about new modes of relation to the non-human world that comprise an important part of what we today mean by the term “nature” and even by the term “wilderness.” The ruralization of space by early states, which I am suggesting can be seen as a pacification of a space of subsistence, would seem to make possible new, and in some ways more intimate, even if also more geographically limited, modes of interaction with the biotic landscape. One of the classical senses of the Greek term *phusis* (and the Latin *natura*) is the simple contrast with artifice. Nature is that which is not made, willed, or caused by humans. Ruralized space bears the physical stamp of the human will, of course, but in an equally valid sense it may open a space for escape from the human world. In other words, it may be easy for environmental theorists such as Oelshlager or Morton to over-estimate the extent to which, in an eco-phenomenological sense, the pre-agricultural “wilderness” is an *inhuman* space. The “nature” in which hunter-gatherers and pre-state agriculturalists were immersed was, it seems, not very often experienced in peaceful reverie or solitude. It was likely very often a space characterized by the ever-present threat posed by potentially hostile neighboring bands of humans. As one historical anthropologist points out, most hunter-gatherers in the distant past occupied densely populated prime habitats, which would systematically differ from the marginal and sparsely populated territories occupied by the few remaining hunter-gatherers today. (Gat, 2008, 18) The idea of nature, as contemporary environmentalism conceives it, is a space of the

non-human, but also importantly, and I contend relatedly, a space of peace. And it is a space of peace and freedom precisely because it can become a space of escape from the human world, and from the strife inherent in the interdependence of the human worlds of commerce, politics, and war.

Bill McKibben, in the opening pages of *The End of Nature*, tells a story about how his restorative walks in the Vermont woods are occasionally ruined by the sound of a nearby chainsaw—an obtrusive, even violent sound of human artifice. In fact, the sound doesn't even have to be actually heard to ruin the experience of nature in this sense. Just the anticipation of the sound, the awareness of its possibility, has much the same “denaturalizing” effect. For McKibben, the point of this story is to illustrate the sense in which the global systemic alteration of the environment by humans, from global warming to stratospheric pollution, marks the death of nature in precisely this eco-phenomenological sense. Even if you don't see the difference, you know it's there. And of course it *is* there, physically, materially—and so sometimes you *do* in fact see it, or feel it. When the jonquils bloom in January or when you recognize the effects of acid rain on a stand of spruce. It is now, McKibben writes, as if “the chainsaw is always in the woods...” (1989, 40) But how much, really, does this post-natural environmental hermeneutic of the Anthropocene environmentalist differ from the pre-natural one of the Pleistocene hunter-gatherer? Perhaps what is lost here is not a primordial nature, but an un-natural “nature;” the agrarian environmentalist's nature; the Arcadian nature first produced by the State. And yet, unnatural though it may be, this agrarian nature may nonetheless be worthy of preserving.

Works Cited

- Benfield, F. K. (2014). *People Habitat: 25 ways to Think about Greener, Healthier Cities*. Island Press.
- Berry, Wendell. 1977. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Berry, W. (1999). In distrust of movements. *The Land Report*, 65, 3-7.
- Berry, W. (2002). Norman Wirzba. *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*.
- Berry, W. 1970. *A Continuous Harmony*. San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Bowne, E. E. (2013). *Mound Sites of the Ancient South: A Guide to the Mississippian Chiefdoms*. University of Georgia Press.
- Bryant, J. M. (1990). "Military technology and socio-cultural change in the ancient Greek city." *The Sociological Review*, 38(3), 484-516.
- Buell. 1995. *Environmental Imagination*. Harvard.
- Cronon, William. 1996. "The Trouble with Wilderness." In *Uncommon Ground*, edited by William Cronon, 69-90. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Doyle, T. (2005). *Environmental movements in minority and majority worlds: a global perspective*. Rutgers University Press.
- Flannery, K. and J. Marcus (2012). *The creation of inequality: how our prehistoric ancestors set the stage for monarchy, slavery, and empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Foster, J. B., Clark, B., & York, R. (2011). *The ecological rift: Capitalism's war on the earth*. NYU Press.
- Gat, A. (2008). *War in human civilization*. Oxford University Press.

Hanagan, N. (2015). From Agrarian Dreams to Democratic Realities: A Deweyan Alternative to Jeffersonian Food Politics. *Political Research Quarterly*, 68(1), 34-45.

Hanson, V. D. (1999). *The other Greeks: the family farm and the agrarian roots of western civilization*. Univ of California Press.

Heidegger. 2006. *Philosophical and Political Writings*, edited by Manfred Stassen. New York: Continuum International.

Hesiod & G.W. Most (2006). Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia (Vol. 1). Harvard University Press.

Hodder, I. (2011). *The Leopard's Tale: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatalhöyük*. Thames & Hudson.

Lesur-Dumoulin, C., Malézieux, E., Ben-Ari, T., Langlais, C., & Makowski, D. (2017). Lower average yields but similar yield variability in organic versus conventional horticulture. A meta-analysis. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, 37(5), 45.

Lynch, K. (1984). *Good city form*. MIT press.

Major, W. (2013). Other Kinds of Violence: Wendell Berry, Industrialism, and Agrarian Pacifism. *Environmental Humanities*, 3(1), 25-41.

McKibben, B. 1991. *The End of Nature*. Random House: New York.

Milner, G. R. (1986). Mississippian period population density in a segment of the central Mississippi River valley. *American Antiquity*, 51(2), 227-238.

Montmarquet, J. A. (1985). Philosophical foundations for agrarianism. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 2(2), 5-14.

Morton, T. (2018). *Being Ecological*. MIT Press.

Oelschlaeger, Max. 1991. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Pauketat, T. R. (2009). *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*. Penguin.

Scales, Ivan. "Green Consumption, Ecolabelling and Capitalism's Environmental Limits," *Geography Compass* 8, no. 7 (2014): 477-489.

- Schneider, M. and Philip McMichael, "Deepening, and Repairing, the Metabolic Rift," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 461–484.
- Scott, J. C. (2017). *Against the grain: a deep history of the earliest states*. Yale University Press.
- Stephanie Nelson's *God and the Land, The Metaphysics of Farming in Virgil and Hesiod*
- Trigger, Bruce. 2003. *Understanding Early Civilizations*. Cambridge.
- Sweet, Timothy. 2002. *American Georgics*. University of Penn Press.
- Marx, Leo. (1964) 2000. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Paul B. 2010. *The Agrarian Vision; Sustainability and Environmental Ethics*. University Press of Kentucky.
- White, Lynn Jr. 1967. "Philosophical Roots of our Environmental Crisis"
- Worster, D. 1994. *Nature's Economy*. Cambridge.
- Yoffee, Norman. 2005. *Myths of the Archaic State*. Cambridge.
- Zomer, R. J., Bossio, D. A., Sommer, R., & Verchot, L. V. (2017). Global sequestration potential of increased organic carbon in cropland soils. *Scientific reports*, 7(1), 15554.