

The Problem of Agriculture

This is an excerpt from the new book Plain Radical: Living, Loving, and Learning to Leave the Planet Gracefully, published by Counterpoint/Soft Skull, which tells the story of Robert Jensen's intellectual and political collaboration with teacher/activist Jim Koplín. Ed. Note: We have previously published another excerpt from Robert's book, From the State Bank of Lake Park to a Critique of Capitalism [here](#).

I was born and raised in North Dakota, a rural state with an economy that historically has been dependent on agriculture, but I knew virtually nothing about the hard work of farming—nor did I understand the way farming creates ecological crises—until I met Jim Koplín. At that time, like most people who labeled themselves as an environmentalist, I thought in terms of pollution in human communities and the need for wilderness preservation. Farming was, well, just something farmers did, not an ecological question. One of the most important contributions Jim made to my education was exposing me to a critique of the increasing industrialization of agriculture, which led me to recognize that there is no solution to environmental problems without facing the problem of agriculture.

That phrase—the problem of agriculture, instead of problems in agriculture—is taken from Wes Jackson, who points out that our species' fundamental break with nature came roughly 10,000 years ago when we started farming. While gathering-hunting humans were capable of damaging a local ecosystem in limited ways, the shift to agriculture and the domestication of animals meant humans for the first time could dramatically alter ecosystems, typically with negative consequences. While there have been better and worse farming practices in history, soil erosion has been a consistent feature of agriculture, making agriculture the first step in the entrenchment of an unsustainable human economy based on extraction.

Agriculture's destructive capacity was ramped up by the industrial revolution that began in the last half of the 18th century in Great Britain, which intensified the magnitude of the human assault on ecosystems. This revolution unleashed the concentrated energy of coal (and eventually oil and natural gas) to run the new steam engine and power the machines in textile manufacturing that dramatically increased productivity. That energy eventually transformed all manufacturing, transportation, and communication, not only creating new ways of making, moving, and communicating, but also radically changing social relations. People were pushed off the land and into cities that grew rapidly, often without planning. World population soared from about 1 billion in 1800 to the current 7 billion, which was made possible by the application of those industrial processes to agriculture. Vaclav Smil estimates that 45 percent of the world's population—more than 3 billion people—would not be here without the Haber-Bosch process, which in the early 20th century made possible the industrial production (using large amounts of natural gas) of ammonia-based fertilizers from atmospheric nitrogen, which greatly expanded food production.

We are trained to think that new technologies mean progress, but the “advances” in oil/gas-based industrial agriculture have accelerated ecological destruction. Soil from large monoculture fields drenched in petrochemicals not only continues to erode but also threatens groundwater supplies and creates dead zones in bodies of water such as the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to the loss of vital topsoil, modern

farming is a primary contributor to reductions in biodiversity and declines in ecosystem health.

The fact that agriculture is failing takes many by surprise, given the dramatic increase in yields made possible by that industrialization of farming and the use of those fossil-fuel based fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. But this is what Jackson has called “the failure of success”: Production remains high while the health of the soil continues to decline dramatically, and so short-term success masks the long-term unsustainability of the system. We have less soil that is more degraded, and there are no technological substitutes for healthy soil; we are exhausting and contaminating groundwater; and contemporary agriculture is dependent on a finite fuel source.

More and more people recognize these problems, which has meant more produce coming from home gardening, urban farms, and community-supported agriculture. But Jackson points out that about 70 percent of the world's calories come from annual grains that take up about 70 percent of the world's cultivated land. That's why The Land Institute's research into “natural systems agriculture” investigates ways that monoculture annual grains (primarily wheat, rice, and corn) can be replaced by perennial grains grown in polycultures (mixtures of plants that don't require new planting every season)—farming that mimics nature instead of trying to subdue it. Jackson points out that when left alone, a natural ecosystem such as a prairie recycles materials, sponsors its own fertility, runs on contemporary sunlight, and increases biodiversity. Natural systems agriculture is one attempt to produce enough food while adding to ecological capital rather than degrading it.

The industrial economy treats the world as either a mine from which we extract what we need or a landfill into which we dump our waste. While there's no telling whether perennial polycultures are going to be the key to sustainable agriculture, it's clear that intensifying the industrialization of agriculture is a losing bet. The modern worldview ignores the fact that everything that supports life on the planet operates in cycles. Jackson offers a powerful image of what has gone wrong: The best symbol for nature is a circle; agriculture is a human attempt to square the circle; industrial agriculture flattens the circle into a straight line on the model of a factory's mass production.

From the State Bank of Lake Park to a Critique of Capitalism

Jim Koplín, who developed the most comprehensive and consistent radical left/feminist/anti-racist/ecological politics of anyone I have ever known, talked with great affection about his time as a bank teller.

Jim was good with numbers, liked working with ordered systems in which accounts could be summed and settled at the end of the day, and was satisfied only when a job was done right—which made him perfect for a summer job at the State Bank of Lake Park. In that small, locally owned bank, serving a main street of small shop owners who served the surrounding farm country in the late 1940s and early '50s, Jim saw the importance of neighborliness and trust in a local economy. That didn't mean everyone in town loved each other or that people always treated each other kindly, but the economy of Lake Park generally worked. The banker knew the folks to whom he was lending money, the store owners knew the nearby farmers, and the richest person in town didn't seem all that different from the poorest, though everyone was aware of who was rich and who wasn't.

Jim spoke fondly of that job, both of the work he did and the people he worked with. And yet throughout his politically conscious life, Jim did not hesitate to describe capitalism as a

depraved and destructive economic system that is incompatible with social justice and ecological sustainability. Jim believed that we have to acknowledge not only the successes but the profound failures of capitalism and leave it behind.

Jim saw no contradiction between his early experience in the Lake Park bank and the conclusion he had reached about the larger economy. Jim understood that complex systems produce complex experiences, and we make sense of a system by looking at patterns over time rather than romanticizing the positive and rationalizing away the negative. That strategy of avoiding difficult truths about capitalism has always been popular, especially after the financial collapse of 2008, as people have scrambled to avoid facing the fact that our economic system is not viable. The problem is “crony capitalism,” say the libertarians, whose worship of “free markets” is akin to pre-modern religious faith. The problem is the expansion of “corporate personhood,” say the liberals, who yearn for a return of the New Deal’s belief in a kinder-and-gentler capitalism. The problem is “too big to fail,” say the technocrats, who always believe there is a policy fix just around the corner.

Crony capitalism, corporate personhood, and too-big-to-fail corporations are, of course, problems in today’s economy. But our focus should be on the deeper, and more disturbing, problems inherent in capitalism, a system that is inhuman, anti-democratic, and unsustainable. Jim understood that what he experienced in the rural economy of his childhood was real, and that at the same time capitalism is a death trap—the system’s corrosive profit-maximizing and obsession with growth were bound to destroy that rural economy and, quite possibly, any hope for a decent future.

How could Jim square that positive experience in small-town America with that anti-capitalist analysis?

First, the community of Lake Park didn’t work because of capitalism, but in spite of capitalism. The sense of mutual obligation that cemented those bonds didn’t come from capitalism, which is based on exactly the opposite idea, that people have no necessary obligation to each other beyond maximizing their self-interest. The connections people felt to each other came from other ways of understanding what it means to be human, rooted primarily in the social and religious institutions of the community. Those connections come from philosophies and theologies that understand human life as achieving its fullest meaning in the common body, and in rural communities that also typically meant understanding the common body as one part of a larger living world, with its own rhythms and cycles. In other words, capitalism is able to function not because of its value system but because it cannibalizes those other value systems.

Second, with every passing generation those other value systems atrophy or are distorted by capitalism’s elevation of narcissism from a character flaw to a virtue. The neighborliness that routinely leads people to share is replaced with purchasing what one needs from professional service providers. Paradoxically, as people come to think of themselves as being more independent and not reliant on others, they really are becoming more dependent—on the money necessary to buy help when the practice of sharing withers. There are exceptions, but in my experience I’ve found that the more wealth people accrue, the more narcissistic they become.

In the United States, capitalism’s most dramatic distortion of another system has come in the marginalizing of the central Christian ethic of communal life and solidarity. Because that ethic is so clearly incompatible with the narcissism of capitalism, mainstream theology has either ignored the problem or twisted scripture and tradition into a theological defense of self-aggrandizement in the quest for wealth.

Neither capitalism nor socialism existed when the New Testament was written, of course, and it’s facile to suggest that a complex text is an endorsement of any modern system. But these scriptures consistently assert the idea that people get closest to the God (however one understands that term) not when they pursue self-interest but by becoming part of a community of equals in which wealth is shared according to need.

To avoid accountability for this cultural decay, older generations tend to blame young people for failing to live up to the elders’ standards, when in fact kids are simply paying attention to the reward system that grownups have created. There is, of course, great variation in how individuals react to those rewards, but the pattern is clear: Each generation, we lose more of the values that have kept capitalism from completely destroying decent human communities. Gangsterism—the goal of getting ahead no matter what the cost to others—slowly becomes the norm, which has so far happened most notably at the very bottom and very top of the system. Street gangs and investment bankers both routinely ignore the consequences of their actions on others, because in both those worlds the pursuit of wealth is the only value.

Third, for the community of Lake Park to work, a lot of other communities had to be destroyed and many more continue to be impoverished. No community exists in a vacuum, in history or in the contemporary world. The state of Minnesota was made possible by the attack on, and forcible displacement of, Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples to make way for the original white settlers, which is part of the capitalist story of Lake Park, as is the slave system that helped propel the United States into the industrial world. By the time Jim took that job at the bank, the United States was established as the pre-eminent empire, wielding unprecedented economic power that helped further enrich an already rich country. Lake Park benefitted, at least in the short term, from those acts of violence and domination, and the fact that those acts are either in the past or out of sight in other parts of the world does not reduce their relevance to our affluence. In evaluating the system, we are obligated to use full-cost accounting.

Fourth, a local economy based on common decency wasn’t going to survive indefinitely in Lake Park, given the logic of capitalism. By the 1970s, farmers started to “get big or get out,” the infamous mantra of Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon. The nice people of Lake Park were no match for the growth imperative and profit obsession of modern capitalism as it played out on a global scale. Capitalism’s ideologues like to talk about the “creative destruction” in the system, how innovation often wipes out existing businesses but creates something new, which sounds fine as an abstract concept but which in practice destroys real people, communities, and ecosystems. If we pay attention to capitalism—not just its critics but its more fervent defenders—none of this should be surprising. As Jim would say so often when analyzing systems, “it’s in the nature of things,” in this case a capitalist economic system that explicitly values profit over people and other living things.

Again, none of this requires us to pretend Lake Park was once paradise on earth or to yearn for some mythical golden age. Small rural communities based on traditional values have long struggled with plenty of social problems—most notably racism, narrow-minded religiosity, sexism, xenophobia—problems we also see in allegedly more sophisticated cities. Jim saw no reason to romanticize the world in which he was raised and no reason to trash it. Nostalgia was harmless, as long as it didn’t displace honest analysis.

That honest economic analysis leads, inevitably, to a harsh critique of capitalism.