



## The Politics of Opting Out

In a recent editorial, Guy McPherson (2011) explained why he decided to resign his position as a tenured professor and “go back to the land.” He believes he “no longer contribute[s] to an empire built on an industrial economy based on consumerism, and thus resist[s] imperialism (i.e., the dominant paradigm, which is characterized by oppression and hierarchy), or live[s] in a city, which is not supported by my moral imperatives” (p. 855). I share many of McPherson’s concerns—from consumerism and industrial capitalism to anthropogenic climate change. I also appreciate the fact that McPherson framed these issues in moral terms. They are not simply scientific or technical problems to be solved.

At the same time, several of the assumptions underlying McPherson’s beliefs could have tremendous practical implications, particularly for poor people around the world. For these reasons, his vision troubles me, especially because it is articulated explicitly in the language of morality.

First, setting aside global north–south divisions (a huge caveat), not everyone in the United States is in the privileged position to go back to the land as McPherson has.

McPherson also declares that the impending dissolution of the industrial economy “will bring an end to the Age of Entitlement and draw us inexorably nearer to the Age of Consequences” (p. 856). Yet such a periodization ignores, if not obscures, the uneven distribution of the benefits and the burdens of a carbon-based economy in the past, present, and future (Smith 2008). In other words, some people have already experienced consequences during the Age of Entitlement, while entitlements persist within the Age of Consequences.

Most broadly, I am disturbed by McPherson’s representation of humans and their interactions with the natural world. The author assumes a tidy divide between nature and culture and portrays humans as inherently detrimental to the environment. For instance, McPherson pronounces, “a system is right and even just if it treats people alike and allows them to live free from the bonds of culture, politics, and a monetary system developed and implemented by others. The first 2 million years of the human experience come immediately to mind. During this period, tribal humans were unshackled by cultural, political, and financial bonds” (p. 856). McPherson represents early humans in a highly romanticized, if not idealized, fashion. In his view, 2 million years ago, humanity had not

yet been tainted by culture or politics. Humans remained part of nature and thus avoided the corrupting influence of organized social relations. McPherson implies that it has been all downhill from this supposedly utopic existence, thereby perpetuating an influential western Edenic narrative (Merchant 1995; Slater 1995). If this is the case, I am not sure how McPherson justifies using modern tools to build his self-sufficient home (p. 857) or taking antibiotics if he had a dangerous infection.

Even beyond the internal contradictions of his position is the ample, first-rate scholarship by anthropologists, archeologists, historians, and others who have thoroughly deconstructed the myth of the “ecological Indian” (e.g., Krech 1999). These scholars have also shown how assumptions about the alleged pure nature of early humans and indigenous peoples—assumptions that underlie McPherson’s views—were central to the industrial economy and western civilization that he denounces (e.g., Cronon 1995; White 1995; Spence 1999). Perpetuating this myth is dangerous because it is not only historically inaccurate but also dehumanizing. Framing early humans and people outside the industrialized world as closer to nature and without culture is in fact neocolonial.

Furthermore, McPherson’s condemnation of culture and politics does not ultimately help the important causes that he espouses. Wendell Berry (1987:143) wrote, “the only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture.” It may be easy to blame politics for causing, if not exacerbating, some of the environmental conundrums we now face. Yet conservation, preservation, environmentalism, and environmental justice movements are all forms of politics, ones McPherson would presumably support. Thus, politics writ large is not the issue.

McPherson recommends going back to the land and invites readers to join him in this cause. Yet he leaves concerned citizens in the early twenty-first century with deeply problematic options. William Cronon (1995) explained that if we frame all human use of the environment as abuse, the only way to protect the natural world would be to eliminate humanity: “If nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves” (p. 83). Such a framework, albeit tidy in its simplicity, conveniently evades the much thornier question of developing responsible, ethical interactions between human and nonhuman nature. Moreover, it risks putting nature before humanity, which would have grave consequences for the world’s poor. Cronon (1995) and Guha

(2008) argue that we need a framework which, among other things, addresses both environmentalism and social justice, a crucial point that receives inadequate attention in McPherson's thought-provoking editorial.

Although McPherson presents going back to the land as the solution, it is actually part of the problem. He asserts that opting out offers a political corrective to the modern industrial economy. Indeed, opting out is political. Most people could not do it, even if they wanted to. Opting out also suggests that our enormous social and environmental problems can be solved by a privileged few retreating from society, thereby leaving the poorest, most disadvantaged, and most vulnerable to contend with the Age of Consequences. To opt out is irresponsible, not because the poor are ignorant or incapable, but because the entitled have, as McPherson himself avows, moral obligations to both humans and nonhumans.

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#### Choosing an Alternative Path

I appreciate Sara Pritchard's letter (Pritchard 2012) regarding my recent editorial (McPherson 2011). A response is warranted particularly because I suspect the

view she presents is shared by others living at the apex of American Empire.

Pritchard's response offers no solution to our fossil-fuel predicaments and implies acceptance of business as usual. I focus on one alternative approach to mainstream culture, but there doubtless exist many others that are less detrimental than the ongoing catastrophe accepted by most people who occupy industrialized nations. Industrialization underlies destruction of air, water, and soil and is furthering the sixth great extinction, continued human-population growth on an already overpopulated planet, and increasing rates of climate change. I focus on the one alternative approach to mainstream culture I engage in for obvious reasons, but there doubtless exist many other approaches within the grasp of humans who are interested in minimizing their effects on Earth. I have no doubt our humanity will emerge more fully after industrial civilization reaches its overdue end, in sharp contrast to the ever-diminishing sense of humanity toward which industrial culture drives us.

As suggested in the second paragraph of the letter, there is little question that those who will benefit most from the demise of American Empire will be "poor people around the world" (I assume the reference is to poverty in the usual, privileged sense of finance). But to assume my choice is available only to individuals with access to ample fiat currency is technically incorrect and morally repugnant. For example, I am joined in my rural community by many individuals of varied social and economic backgrounds, from formally educated trust-fund recipients to self-taught do-it-yourselfers who have chosen voluntary financial poverty because they value life over money. I am also joined by a few neighbors who live as human animals in the Neolithic sense, striving for the lowest possible effect on Earth and its inhabitants, human and otherwise. Of course, these few individuals are overwhelmed in numbers by the millions of people who live close to Earth in nonindustrial cultures, not to mention our precivilization predecessors.

Almost nobody in the United States and other industrialized countries is interested in the alternative approach I have taken to mainstream culture, largely because individuals in these countries occupy positions of imperial privilege. I believed walking away from my privileged position would inspire others to take similar actions, although I have been disappointed in the muted response to date. Among my neighbors are many individuals who, working collaboratively, have overcome a paucity of monetary resources to develop a life-affirming set of living arrangements consistent with their ethics. They have turned away from mainstream culture by relying on collaboration, intellect, and minimal financial resources. Securing the conditions to thrive on this planet—clean water, healthy food, shelter, and a decent human community—requires significant doses of courage, compassion, and creativity, but minimal financial input.

I certainly agree with Pritchard's assertion that "the uneven distribution of the benefits and the burdens of a carbon-based economy in the past, present, and future" is a reflection of American Empire, which enables "entitlements [to] persist within the Age of Consequences." This sentiment alone provides an excellent reason to develop a set of living arrangements that is more humane than industrial civilization. I propose we live outside industrial civilization while simultaneously terminating the imperialism it furthers.

I agree with the conclusion that Neolithic "humans remained part of nature and thus avoided the detrimental influence of organized social relations." In the few thousand years represented by civilization, human animals have come a long way from a close-to-the-land, close-to-their-neighbors existence. I would love to see us return to our roots, even if such an arrangement shortened my own life, as indicated in my original article ("personal survival was the least important reason I fled an empire in decline").

I have not—and would not—conclude that early humans lived without culture. However, I fail to understand how any case can be made contrary to the notion in my editorial that "early humans and people outside the industrialized world [lived] closer to nature" than most contemporary humans in industrialized nations. Such a statement does not imply, much less conclude, neocolonialism.

Notwithstanding the selectively chosen lines from agrarian anarchist Wendell Berry and historian William Cronon, living within the mainstream of American culture contributes to an increasingly violent society that continues to minimize or ignore the negative consequences of our collective actions on other cultures and species. Ultimately, doing so will lead to our own extinction, as described in the second paragraph of this response. The letter's call for minor changes to the extant, irredeemably corrupt system leaves me perplexed: I prefer termination of an industrial economy that is contributing to numerous, ongoing crises, but even my conclusion to opt out of the system is preferable than the no-solutions approach offered in Pritchard's response.

Supporters of industrial culture, including the many individuals Pritchard cites, tout as solutions to ongoing destruction of air, water, and soil, the sixth great extinction, continued human-population growth, and climate change a host of approaches and tactics that have failed and continue to fail. Relying on organizations that depend on and support growth of the industrial economy—including those in the arenas of conservation, environmentalism, social justice, and big government—is a prescription for ongoing and accelerating disaster. Government is not a friend of the people, unless one considers corporations people. The federal governments of the world and their attachment to corporations that value money over human happiness are, predictably, leading to wholesale destruction of life on the planet on which we depend. Relying on industrialized culture, which is a culture of death, to "save the planet," is oxymoronic.

Although space constraints prevented full articulation of my views, I have written broadly on many of the other issues raised in the letter, notably a book focused on the links between environmental protection, social justice, and the industrial economy (McPherson 2004). The central premise underlying my personal choices and philosophy are that industrial civilization requires obedience at home, oppression abroad, and wholesale destruction of air, water, soil, and non-human species. As such, I believe we should terminate industrial civilization on behalf of life, including human life. The first step I took toward this goal was to walk away from empire. I continue to take other steps, and I invite Pritchard and other readers to join me.

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