

Who will stand against Progress?

Annotations by Alan Jacobs

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These days he would be mobbed as an “eco-fascist”, but Edward Goldsmith would probably have been better described as a traditionalist. The founder of *The Ecologist* magazine, where he employed me as a naive young writer in the late Nineties, Goldsmith was also a founding father of the early British green movement, though he always moved at 90 degrees to much of it. He seemed to like things that way; if he wasn't pushing against the tide, even of his own side, he wasn't happy.

Goldsmith founded *The Ecologist* in the early Seventies to challenge the myth of Progress, which was then at its bombastic and all-conquering peak. It was the age of big dams and DDT and space programmes, and Teddy was having none of it. Inspired by his studies and experience of indigenous communities, he was contemptuous of the “development” pushed by Western governments, NGOs and transnational corporations, which to his mind was colonisation disguised as charity. He believed that modernity was destroying both culture and nature, and that we should return to the models of the past, an argument which he laid out most convincingly in his *magnum opus*, *The Way*.

But Teddy was not an easy man to work with. He was chaotic and disorganised, he delighted in controversy, and he had what I regarded back then, in my youthful arrogance, as a ridiculous resistance to actually making himself understood. He would never use a simple word when he could invent a more complicated one, and if you ever dared to use the word “accessible” in his presence, he would go red in the face under his whitening beard.

These days, under my own whitening beard, I find that I'm almost entirely on his side, but back then I thought that greater accessibility was precisely what his work, and that of the wider green movement, desperately needed. This was before anyone in the media had heard of climate change or “sustainability”. Greta Thunberg was only a glint in her father's eye. But I wanted to save the whole world all by myself, and I knew that the first step towards doing that was to tell the whole world precisely what was wrong with it, in easy language and with big pictures attached.

So when Teddy told me one day, with some relish, that he was writing a book called *Against Progress*, I found myself spitting nails. What was the silly old sod doing that for? Did he want to alienate everybody? Didn't he realise that this was the equivalent of insulting somebody's religion in public? Why couldn't he at least try to reach the mainstream with his important arguments? People needed to hear them urgently, so that we could change course! Couldn't he at least, if only in the cause of *saving the planet*, try to be more... *accessible*?

Teddy never wrote that book, but I've purloined the title and used it here in his honour, and in acknowledgement of my wrongness. In the quarter of a century since then, the green argument has been made so "accessible" that it has been entirely absorbed and redirected by the system it set out to challenge, something that Teddy could probably see coming even if I couldn't. Now, in the age of vat-grown eco-food, industrialised hilltops, killer robots and emerging machine intelligence, it's become as clear as day that Teddy was right. Standing Against Progress is no fringe luxury, or eccentric tic: it is a first principle for anyone who is paying attention.

The work of what we have come to call Progress is the work of homogenising the world. I capitalise the word because Progress is an ideology — even a metaphysics — and if we want to understand it we need to grasp its foundational assumptions. We are trained from birth to see the living world and its people as a matrix of interchangeable parts, all of them potentially for sale. Our bodies, our nations, our forests, our heritage: Progress will not stop until everything is measured, commercialised, commodified, altered at the genetic level, put up for sale, forced into "equitable" relationships with everything else, or otherwise flattened and sold.

This is a nice brief summary of what I've been calling "metaphysical capitalism"

The religion of Progress is leading us into the flames, as Teddy saw so many decades back. Those of us who feel this way need to have the confidence to say to: to denounce the religion of the age, to dissect it, to make claims against it. Those of us who seek to resist the emerging Total System, or simply to give it the slip, need an alternative worldview: something to stand for, and stand upon. Not an ideology, mind, and certainly not a blueprint for utopia. That's what got us into this mess in the first place. No, what we need is something more old-fashioned: a stance. Even a politics. But what should it look like?

In a way, it seems like a superfluous question. After all, modernity has been the age of revolutions, and we have ideologies coming out of our ears. The last century has been an inferno of competing ideals on Left and Right and elsewhere, all offering a better world. But none of them, in my opinion, has challenged what Mary Harrington has usefully called "Progress Theology" at its root. They have just taken different paths towards it.

Various strands of socialism and communism, for example, have been pursued for nearly two centuries in the cause of abolishing or taming the monster of global capitalism. Some were beneficent, some were tyrannical, but none challenged the core values of Progress: all were centralised, statist, in love with technology's promise and had their own idealist, rationalised notions of how humanity should remake Eden. Anarchism has lurked perpetually on the sidelines, but it's barely been able to organise a meeting, let alone a revolution. The greens have been absorbed by the technosphere. Meanwhile fascism, National Socialism and their various cousins on the hard Right are infested with power-worship, a love of straight lines and marching columns, and an explicit call to impose the will of the strong on the unwilling bodies of the weak.

This is true, but I think the problem is the failure to understand that anarchism must depend on EMERGENT rather than PLANNED organization

Perhaps conservatism, then, could fit the bill? In theory, at least, it is the tradition which comes closest to offering a politics rooted in human reality. It promotes the value of tradition, centres home and family, values religious faith and refuses both the centralised state and abstract ideals of utopian justice. It embraces a society based on a notion of virtue, which itself is drawn from the cosmic realm.

True of conservatism in practice, though it had (and ignored) the resources to be something more

But conservatism has failed as well. This is partly because it was always only, in Roger Scruton's words, "a hesitation within liberalism". Conservatism is a modern confection, a product of the post-1789 shift in Western consciousness (the "ism" is the giveaway). It evolved to slow the revolution, rather than turn it around — for how could it be turned around? Conservatism's failure, in that sense, was baked in from the start, and by now, across most of the modern world, there is simply nothing left to conserve.

This in turn is partly due to conservatism's other flaw: its love affair with private property and the sovereign individual. Both of these things can be necessary bulwarks against the top-down collectivism of the Left, but taken to extremes they lead to a top-down collectivism of another kind: oligarchic capitalism. That "conservatives" have been the foremost defenders of this monstrosity, as it strips the world of all the things which they claim to hold dear, is the greatest hole beneath their waterline. It is the reason why the political factions which bear the name are now little more than business cabals, throwing out anti-woke red meat to the proles here and there to disguise the fact that all they really want to conserve is their money.

Indeed, it was the emphasis on private property and the sovereign individual that *led to* conservatism's becoming merely a hesitation within liberalism

Yet if we look back further in history, there is a political descriptor that might, just might, apply to what I have been trying to write about here; something that we could perhaps pin to our lapels as we resist Progress Theology. I came across it in an obscure, 40-year-old history book, and a lightbulb went off somewhere in my skull. This, I thought, despite my instinctive loathing of labels and categories, might just be one that I could see myself claiming. Allow me to introduce you to the reactionary radicals.

Craig Calhoun's drily-titled book, *The Origins of Class Struggle*, was published in 1982, and despite the title it is not a Marxist tome. In fact, it was written specifically to take aim at the popularity of Marx-inflected history, of the kind exemplified in E. P. Thompson's famous work *The Making of the English Working Class*. Calhoun was politely critical of Thompson for imposing an anachronistic Marxist framework on the historical "struggles" of workers in the early stages of the industrial revolution, and particularly for labelling as "working class" people who did not fit into that category. For Calhoun, Marx's binary portrait of a "proletariat" set against a "bourgeoisie" may have had some utility when studying the factory system of the late nineteenth century, but it didn't apply to those artisans, farmers, small businessmen and families who resisted the rise of that system in the first place.

Those people — most famously the machine-breaking Luddites — were in Calhoun's telling more radical than the later "proletariat" would turn out to be (despite Marx's urging). While the industrial working class were fighting for their rights within the established factory system, the earlier rebels were striving to prevent that system's arrival. Calhoun had a name for these people: "reactionary radicals".

In my work over the years, I have told the stories of some of their contemporary equivalents: Brazil's landless worker's movement, Mexico's Zapatistas, West Papua's tribal freedom movement, England's anti-privatisation campaigners. But it was only when I read Calhoun's book that I realised what I had been doing: tracing the thread of reactionary radicalism as it continued to resist the spread of Progress around the world. Calhoun's framing explained my own work — and my own politics — to me in two simple words, and at the same time gave me an explanation as to why that work had sometimes been mischaracterised or misunderstood. **Reactionary radicalism does not fit easily into any Left-Right paradigm. It is a politics from an older world.**

Calhoun's book is the story of the doomed resistance of the pre-industrial people of England to the destruction of their economies and associated ways of life. Accustomed as we are now to "work" and "home" and "consumption" and "production", it can be hard for us to understand that for most people in pre-modern times, these amounted to the same thing. For an artisan weaver in early modern England, for example, home was where the family lived and worked, where children were born and reared and trained, where trade was carried out, where food was grown and eaten. Today all of this has been broken apart into small segments — turning the home into a dormitory, its adult inhabitants into both "workers" and "consumers" elsewhere, its children into pupils at a distant school, its parlour into a show-room for TV, tablet and gaming console, its kitchen into a store-room for shop-bought, processed "food". What brought this about? The industrial revolution and the rise of the factory system. In a word: capitalism.

But those who resisted this process, emphasises Calhoun, did not do so for the kind of ideologically-driven reasons that a class-conscious Marxist might. What the reactionary radicals were defending above all, says Calhoun, was the "moral economy" — the polar opposite of the "free market" that was being built on the bones of old England. The free market commodified everything, from products to people, and sought to make that commodification global. The booming British empire was a scaling-up of what was already happening in England. Empire, in this sense, was never a story of "the British" imposing their ways onto "the colonies". It was a story of factory lords, big landowners and a newly-empowered capitalist class destroying the moral economies of communities from Lancashire to the Punjab, and forcing all of their peoples into the new capitalist "workplace" — where most of us remain to this day.

Cf. Wendell Berry on the "Two Economies" — the industrial economy and the Kingdom of God: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/003463738408100204>

Reactionary radicalism, then as now, is a defence of a pre-industrial, human-scale system, built around community bonds, empowered people, local economics. The attack on that system may come via gunboats or trade agreements, redcoats or giant superstores, enclosure acts or digital currencies, but it will always suck wealth out of place-based communities and funnel it to distant stockholders, just as it will suck the power away from local people and funnel it to national or international bodies. It will always replace people with technology, and it will always make consumers of us all.

The way that reactionary radicals, in the early years of the industrial revolution, attempted to defend the moral economy was not with the thoughtless thuggery that the propaganda of the victors would later suggest, but by a reasoned series of demands. The Luddites, for example, opposed new machinery in a way that was “thoughtful, not absolute”. They also, Calhoun, points out, “*campaigned for the right of craft control over trade, the right to a decent livelihood, for local autonomy... Machinery was at issue because it specifically interfered with these values.*” Technology, thought the Luddites, should be applied in a way which reinforced the moral economy rather than destroyed it. This is the absolutely essential point

Is it possible to cleave to a reactionary radicalism today? Or is it too late? For the reality is that the reactionary radicals of pre-industrial England comprehensively lost. The moral economy was destroyed, and we live in its commercialised ruins. Not only did they lose, but the ideologies of the modern age, both Right and Left, have an interest in burying their memories. The Marx-inflected Left wants no truck with workers who resisted capitalism in order to defend traditional ways of life, because those traditional ways stink of “reaction” and what Marx himself called “the idiocy of rural life”. Meanwhile, because modern conservatism has attached itself limpet-like to capitalism, its advocates today can often be found defending the very matrix of global trade, empire and unaccountable corporate power that laid waste to the last remaining “conservative” cultures in England.

As ever, the modern ideologies fail us. And yet, reactionary radicalism is still to be found, if we look in the right places. It is especially prevalent outside the West, in places where traditional moral economies are still at least partially intact. Every time you hear of a village in China or India resisting a giant dam, or tribal people fighting eviction from their ancestral lands, or communities resisting vast mines, you are hearing from reactionary radicals.

But what of those of us in the “developed” world, where Progress has triumphed? Well, if the moral economy has been destroyed where we live, we are just going to have to start rebuilding it. I spent years of my life investigating experiments in doing so; my ageing but perhaps-still-useful book *Real England* contains plenty of examples. Perhaps we live in the place our ancestors lived, or perhaps we moved to our place from another last month: either way, we are part of the place’s life now. We can help turn it into a moral economy — a foundation from which to resist the values of Progress — or we can capitulate to those values. We start small: everything starts small, and the best things remain that way. All we have is our limited power; still, it has its own impact.

Reactionary radicalism operates at the human scale, and not at the scale on which ideology operates. Ideology is the enemy of particularity, which is why every modern revolution has ended up turning on its own people. From the mass murder of peasants in the Vendee by French revolutionaries to the Bolshevik slaughter of workers in Kronstadt, ideology is always the enemy of genuine, rooted communities. Real culture — human-scale culture — is messy. It cannot be labelled. The moral economy rarely makes rational sense. But it makes *human* sense. And that is what matters.

No one will ever accept the model of resistance that PK articulates here without grasping that the economy of the Kingdom of God operates at a far smaller scale than the depredations of the industrial economy — and this is, again, why I think the emergent order of anarchism, properly understood, is the best available means to promote the Kingdom of God. Maybe we need to begin with what James Scott calls THE ART OF NOT BEING GOVERNED: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300169171/art-not-being-governed/>