

APOSTLE OF CATASTROPHE

*Derek Turner interviews ecologist
and anarcho-communalist*
KIRKPATRICK SALE



Your critique of contemporary industrial civilization is so far-ranging and so radical that it is difficult to know where to begin questioning you. Every conversation seems to go back to first principles. In an interview with *Wired* magazine some years ago, you said that civilization was “a catastrophe”. So before we start to explore any of the specific terms and ideas associated with you, perhaps you could give us a one-paragraph summary of what exactly you feel is so wrong with our society. And was there a moment of epiphany for you – or have you always felt ill at ease with the way we live?

Western civilization of the last 500 years is built on the pillars of humanism, capitalism, scientism and militarism, each of them dangerously corrupting and degrading of the human soul and human society. Humanism taught the triumph of humans over all other forms of nature, animate and not, and sanctioned one species in its domina-

tion of nature by whatever means it chose. Capitalism, the enshrinement of materialism, is developed on every one of the seven deadly sins but sloth, and even encourages that. Scientism is the belief that the only way to understand the world is materially and ‘rationally’, deposing spiritual, emotional and moral perceptions and even common sense, with instruments of technology meant at bottom, in Schiller’s phrase, to “de-God” nature and thus master it. And militarism is the deadly and destructive means by which the civilization was able to install the other pillars around the world and direct the affairs of national governments. All of these, I would suggest, have developed in their extreme in the modern United States of America – enough demonstration in itself of the hideousness of civilization.

I have always been opposed to governments, seeing in them the immoral, overlarge, clumsy interference with the basic human units of family and com-

munity. But I did not come to the analysis here of this civilization as a whole until I wrote my book on Columbus, who was the man who inaugurated the Modern Age and the triumph of Western culture.

Over 40 years, you have made many different suggestions as to how society could be made pleasanter and more responsive – bioregionalism, small-scale economics, localism, separatism and neo-Luddism. Perhaps we could start by your defining the unusual term bioregionalism. Where do the idea and term come from, and what do they mean?

Bioregionalism is the operating of human societies within the boundaries that nature has created for them – as watersheds, for example, or mountain ranges, or deserts, or islands, where the life-forms (“bio”) suggest how society is to be directed (“region”). A world where such bioregions were the basic units of government and economy would do away with artificial nation-states and create units that were directly, intimately tied to the earth and its systems and species. This would be a world of decentralized power, local autonomy, sustainable production and trade and direct democracy. (There is some dispute about the coinage, but it was in use in the late 1970s on the West Coast, where the bioregional movement began.)

Historically, this is the way the world pretty much operated before the rise of

the modern nation-state, even within most empires of the past when those arose. People lived in small geographic areas, defined by a water source or a valley or a *mesa* or the like, and wrested their living from the natural sources around them, sometimes carelessly (particularly in early empires) but for the most part with some reverence for the land and the fellow creatures upon it. Their technologies were modest and they did not wreak much havoc on natural systems, even with the development of agriculture, which does have a fairly heavy ecological impact at first.

That means that it would not be difficult to so construct society today, if we chose to do so. To live divided into small units of geography and biota, largely self-sufficient, with minimal technology, resources only from the bioregion, and devoted to restoring and preserving it in its natural condition. Guided by these bioregional principles:

- Everything is connected
 - you can’t do one thing
- There is no free lunch – our actions always have consequences
- There is no “away”
 - as in throwing things to
- *Primum no nocera* – the Hippocratic oath’s “first do no harm”
- Small is beautiful
 - live within limits
- All life is sacred, and all species have value in themselves quite apart from their value to humans

- And Mother knows best – Mother Earth, who has been attending to life for some 3.5 billion years now.

Bioregionalism as defined by you would seem to exclude not only empires but also today's nation-states. And you have also specifically attacked nationalism as a modern evil. But isn't nationalism really an earlier response to similar problems of gigantism and lack of representation? Do not old and especially tribal nations embody the notion of bioregionalism or at least localism? They surely represent genuine loci of resistance to homogenization.

Nationalism certainly was not a response to gigantism – it *created* it. And in the form of empires it made it global. Nationalism, like the empires before it, was a system designed to do away with independent tribes, city-states, and communities, as well as the principalities, margravates, dukedoms, archbishoprics, cantons, shires, duchies, earldoms, and palatinates that governed people before it. It was a means of consolidating power and centralizing it, doing away with governments that, even as principalities, were small enough so that they had some immediate connection with the governed and so had to act with some regard for popular opinion.

Your mention of tribalism raises an important point. Tribes of limited size – usually around 500 people, rarely going over 1,000 – characterized human life for the greatest portion of our life

on earth, probably from the beginning of *Homo erectus* some 1.8 million years ago. This is how we lived for so long that it is obviously encoded in our genes, so deeply embedded that it exists even now, after a succession of empires for 8,000 years and 500 years of developing nation-states – we see it in that desire for 'community' that seems to be an almost universal longing today.

The number 500 is important. It is the size that most fits human capacities: when everyone can know every other by face, by voice, by name, and when everyone can develop a sense of, as Gordon Rattray Taylor once put it, "the significance of a majority of the other individuals in the group, in relation to himself." It is the size of successful communes, of preferred elementary schools (so that the principal can know the first names of all the students), of neighbourhoods in English planned cities.

That should tell us something about how to configure our societies – not that politicians pay any attention.

Your desire for self-sustaining natural communities leads ineluctably to a desire to dissolve all or most present political entities – in other words, separatism.

A world of bioregions with communities of 500 people would be ideal, but I'm afraid for the time being in the world as it is we have to look somewhere else for ideas of human-scale governance. And that's where the idea

of secession, and self-determination comes in.

The power of that idea is twofold. First, the most practical way to dismantle the world's large empires and nation-states is through secession, and in fact it is a process that has gone on with some considerable success in the last half-century - including the dissolving of the British, French, Portuguese and Russian empires. The American empire could be similarly dismantled if the component states of the United States asserted their rights to secession, and indeed there are now secessionist organizations of varying strengths and activity in nearly half of the 50 states of the union.

Second, a division into smaller political units allows the establishment of some forms of genuine democracy in place of the absolutely undemocratic monoliths of large and clumsy nations. In the case of the United States, where at present the members of the House of Representatives 'represent' on average nearly 700,000 citizens each and elections have become almost meaningless, the secession of any state would create an independent nation where a more efficient and democratic system of governance would be possible; if 50 states seceded they would have on average six million people each - a workable number for democracy as Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and others can attest.

Please tell us a little about the Middlebury Institute - when it was founded, by whom, activities to date and any specific plans for the near future.

The idea for a thinktank devoted to the secession movement was born out of a meeting in Middlebury, Vermont, in the fall of 2004, just after the re-election of George Bush and company. A gathering of maybe 75 activists at what was billed as a "radical consultation" went through the possible strategies open to serious Americans interested in working for a fundamental alteration of the national government we suffer under and creating societies responsive to basic human needs.

We began with elective politics, the idea of voting for the same old Democrats and Republicans, but it didn't take long to reject that as futile: *they* were the ones we wanted to change, after all, they had proved time and again how beholden they were to the corporate masters who pay for their campaigns, and votes. And we took no time in rejecting the reformist lobby-Congress trap that so many environmental and liberal-cause groups spend so much money and effort on, since that was, after all, trying to influence those same corrupt officials.

Next we considered the third-party alternative, thinking of Perot's and Nader's influence on national politics, and concluded that they did so poorly, despite considerable money and media attention, because the two major par-

ties had essentially rigged the system so that outsiders couldn't win. Besides, launching a party and fighting an election on a national scale involves getting money and support from the same kinds of people and organizations that contribute to the other parties, and in the process becoming beholden to them.

So if reformism in all its guises is rejected, what other means of action for serious change? There's always revolt and revolution, of course, but it didn't take much deliberation to decide that there was no way, even if there were trained militia bands and some weaponry smuggled in by separatist sympathizers in Canada, a serious revolution could be mounted in this country today – and no reason to doubt that Washington would use its most potent weaponry to crush it if it arose.

And that leaves secession. Instead of reforming or attacking the corrupt and corporatist system ... leave it. At first glance, it seemed like a crazy idea to many, and maybe as dangerous as a revolution – after all, the last time anybody in this country tried secession, they were attacked ruthlessly and eventually destroyed. But the more we considered it, it seemed like a reasonable option, particularly if it was done peaceably and openly.

So it seemed a good idea to start a thinktank to study and promote secession, and thus the Middlebury Institute was born. It is actually not located in Middlebury but in my house in New

York State, because after all it's an idea not a place, and the only scholar there is me. But we've produced and distributed six essays on secession, established a registry of active North American secession organizations, created a webpage with links to other secession groups and directories of secession activities around the world, sponsored the First North American Secessionist Convention in Burlington, Vermont, in November 2006, and are co-sponsoring a second Secessionist Convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in October 2007.

However attractive we may find the idea of the world being divided up into hundreds or thousands of tiny principalities and powers, is it not possible that by opting out and splitting up we are simply leaving ourselves open to be conquered by more aggressive forces – whether free market reductionism, Islamism or aggressive foreign powers? Small states are not particularly vulnerable to conquest of any kind, not any more and usually less than big ones. Think about those that have lasted for considerable years, like Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Holland, Denmark, Iceland, Andorra, Malta, New Zealand. Small states have less in the way of treasure that other states covet to the point of invasion, and considerably less in the way of resources necessary to wage war, particularly beyond its neighbours. And small states don't *start* conflicts – that's

what large states do; when Randolph Bourne said that “warfare is the health of the state,” he meant the kind that were engaged in World War I.

Leopold Kohr used to point out that in the medieval period, when there was nothing but small states, there may have been wars, but they were *little* wars, fought only between neighbours and between armies of a sort, they didn’t last long, they didn’t do any significant damage or cause very many casualties, and they didn’t alter power structures significantly. It was only when those little states were eventually agglomerated into large ones, the German-speaking dukedoms and principalities united into Germany, for example, that Europe had large wars with vast casualties and terrible damages, including civilian deaths.

I see no reason to think that Islam, even militant Islam, or an aggressive North Korea, would have any interest in starting a war on an independent Vermont, for example, or even an independent Hawaii. You might argue that China, say, would try to gobble up the former United States if it were disunited into forty or fifty independent countries. But in the first place that would not necessarily mean the elimination of American defensive weapons, only their dispersal into the hands of a number of states, and in the second the thought of trying to rule over 50 separate contentious governments even if they were militarily successful would

daunt even the most autocratic Asian minds.

And of course America becomes much less of an enemy to Islam or China when it is broken into smaller states and the horrendous empire with its 750 bases around the world is destroyed and its rampant capitalism no longer controls and manipulates the world economy.

Don’t we need a critical mass if we are to make our feelings known, and hopefully influence human society? In any case, there does not seem to be any guarantee that smallness equals peacefulness – although clearly it lessens the possibility of doing harm.

You speak of “critical mass”. That is a means of imposing the will of a mass, usually a minority of “critical” experts and intellectuals, upon the rest of the society, and I do not believe it should be done even if it could be. Even if successful – and even if done with the best will in the world – it would result in the imposition of one ideology upon all the rest, and I find that an anathema. That is precisely what bioregional or secessionist states spare us from. I don’t mind “influencing human society,” though I think it can be done on only a small scale, but I don’t want to be part of a mass in doing it.

In a 2005 article for Counterpunch.org, you assailed empires for a bewildering variety of reasons – because of

their “size, complexity, territorial reach, stratification, heterogeneity, domination, hierarchy, and inequalities, capitalism, individualism, nationalism, technophilia and humanism (as the dominance of humans over nature)”. But aren’t human beings by nature stratified, hierarchical, short-termist and self-absorbed? And if so, shouldn’t we take these tendencies into account when formulating remedies? Your emphasis on “moral understanding” implies that you are aware of such tendencies. Doesn’t such ‘original sin’ necessitate complex countering frameworks – whether religious, legal or political?

Please, no “human nature” or “original sin.” I’ve made a close study of how humans behaved for most of their time as human species, and that’s as close to answering the question of human nature as we’re going to get. It shows clearly that humans lived without stratification and hierarchy for most of the time – indeed, we can date the first hierarchical societies to about 28,000 years ago – and as communal, sharing, cooperative tribes from about 1.5 million years ago (that’s the date of the first campfires), until we began settling down and forming cities and empires 8,000 years ago. So in designing the kinds of politics and societies we would like to have, we don’t take into account the abnormal traits that nation-states and empires have forced on us – that indeed is what we are rejecting. We don’t want to re-create religious, legal, or political

forces that are designed to control, disempower, enfeeble, devitalize, weaken, and tranquilize the citizenry, which is what our churches, laws, and legislatures are set up for now.

Your views sometimes seem to be a strange blend of ultra-conservatism and leftwing idealism – to use admittedly crude terminology.

I don’t know what you mean by ultra-conservative and leftwing idealism – indeed, left and right seem utterly banal and useless ideas.

In a flat world, you can have left and right, but in a round world, which is what we live on, there are totalitarians at the top (Stalin, Hitler, Genghis Khan) and anti-authoritarians at the bottom (anarchists, communalists, libertarians), with squishy liberals and mindless conservatives in between. I locate myself, of course, at the bottom – I am an anarchocommunalist – where you just might find some ultra-conservatives but never an idealistic liberal.

The mention of “technophilia” above reminds me of your critique of technology, and sympathetic interest in the Luddites. Most people would agree that technology can have deleterious effects. But surely it can also be liberating in some ways – by relieving people of industrial drudgery, for instance, or the internet, which has enabled the rapid spread of ideas such as yours without being filtered through third parties.

And even if there were absolutely no benefits to technology, isn't it the case that when people can have laptops, mobile phones and i-Pods they start to insist on them, and eventually come to regard them as a kind of 'human right'?

Technology is tricky. Of course humans have had technology from the beginning – the hand axe being the most notable – and in fact it is this that made humans the kind of animals they are, using technology against nature to secure their survival. And we got better and better at it until finally we exterminated a good part of the edible animal world and turned to agriculture, the domestication – or, better, enslavement – of plants and animals. And so it has continued, the increased use and development of technology to allow humans today the total domination of the globe and all its systems and species, to the point now that we have such powerful technologies that we are threatening continued life on earth. That's why I wrote about the Luddites and subtitled the book, "Lessons for the Computer Age", because I wanted people to understand the dire consequences of an enthrallment, an enslavement, to more and more powerful technology.

As to modern digital technology, it's obvious that to perform certain tasks easily and swiftly it has advantages – that's why it's created, after all. But they are a fairly limited range of tasks, and they do not include any of the ba-

sic human tasks of loving, raising children, living communally, creating civic bonds, understanding nature, identifying with species, creating peace and harmony, knowing humility, learning and thinking deeply, bringing joy to others, or understanding one's soul and self. For starters.

Relieving people of "drudgery" may or may not be such a good thing, if by drudgery you mean steady, difficult work. And relieving people of industrial jobs in the "developed" world may be liberating for some – though as it turns out it is more likely to mean unemployment, poverty, idleness or wrenching re-training – but all it has done is put the meaningless rote jobs of industry overseas. And technologies used in industry in the West have not particularly made life easier, even for the few that use them, as near as anyone can tell.

As to the internet, it has as many downsides as up, and I have not seen the rapid spread of any of *my* ideas through it. In fact, in some ways the deeper meaning and understanding of most of my good ideas is in some ways made more difficult with it, since they are disembodied, read and discarded quickly, compete with a million other ideas that cyberspace can generate and spread, and have to do with a world in which such technologies are pointless. People who believe that there is a "human right" to technology are neither human nor right.

Finally, you have made a famous bet that by 2020, the modern world will have imploded. Doesn't this bet of yours bespeak a secularised millenarianism – or more simply wishful thinking?

The bet comes from a philosophy that I call collapsism. It argues that the present world cannot continue as it is (that would seem to be obvious) and that the American empire will collapse as all other empires have before it – by ecological, economic, civic, and military destruction – and take Western civilization down with it. You have to agree that all the evidence seems to be on my side. Ecological: global warming, extreme climate, species extinction, fisheries depletion, diseases epidemics, water and air pollution, forests destruction, desertification, overpopulation. Economic: US debt at \$8.5 trillion, trade deficit at \$750 billion a year, debt to China of \$90 billion, unstable stock markets, credit crises, peak oil, declining dollar, fragile system of World Bank and WTO globalization. Civic: civil wars and rebellions in about 50 countries in the world, unsustainable repression in most of the rest, including – especially – the US with its Patriot and Torture Acts, 25% of the world's criminal population in its jails, and the largest bureaucracy ever created to provide domestic 'security'. Military: the US military, the largest in world history and bigger than all the rest in the world, overstretched in 750 bases in 153 countries, bogged down in two

un-winnable wars, sending arms to 50 nations around the world, unable to control nuclear weapons, and hated by the greatest part of the world's population.

Now of course I would like to see the empire collapse, as horrifying as that will be, because I see in it the only way to save the planet and come out with a chance for small-state democracy and prosperity on the other side. But that is not why I was willing to bet \$10,000 that it is going to happen. That is the result of cold, analytic thinking about the inevitable reality of collapse.

Of course I may not be around to collect the money if I win. And I figure the dollar will be worthless even if I lose. ♦

KIRKPATRICK SALE

is the author of a dozen books, including Human Scale, The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy; Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War Against the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age, and After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination. He is the Director of the Middlebury Institute and editor-at-large of Vermont Commons. His articles have appeared in the Nation, New York Times Magazine, Utne Reader, New Internationalist, Resurgence, and the Ecologist. The Middlebury Institute website is at www.MiddleburyInstitute.org

