

Giving Way to the Land

Engineering students in India asked me to explain “anti-environmentalism” in the West. By Joan Chevalier

Mucking out my horse’s stall, I thought: “God, I am stinky and dirty.” This was followed by a rare mental pause—that moment in meditation when enlightenment is supposed to flower. My enlightenment: “I really like being stinky and dirty.” So, there you have it. No angel wings for me; a pickax will be my portion of ascendance.

For most of my life, liberalism was my intellectual home. Today, I am a card-carrying “radical centrist” and registered Independent with a preference now for that most elusive thing: whatever works.

It began in President Theodore Roosevelt’s birthplace in New York City. A quaint brownstone that hardly seems like the birthplace for such a riotous character. More than 15 years ago, Ted Roosevelt IV and I organized a roundtable discussion there about tensions between rural communities in the American West (ranchers, miners, foresters, fishermen and -women, farmers) and environmentalists.

Many of the mighty in Washington, D.C., (at least in their own estimation) attended. I chose to befriend two ranchers, a husband and wife, from Wyoming. I didn’t know the facts on the ground. But this much was clear: Neither Stan nor Mary could lie. They spent their lives exercising their truth-telling muscle just as much as every other muscle that horses and cows and hard lands demand.

I don’t know how it is in India. I suspect that the divide between rural and urban people is becoming corrosive almost everywhere, but it is remarkably so in the United States, where political affiliations are disproportionately aligned with where you live: Democrats prevail in coastal cities; Republicans prevail in the great broad empty reaches.

So I took a little time for a rangeland management course in Wyoming. I had all sorts of ideas about how environmentalists and rural people could work together. I had all sorts of ideas about how ranchers could manage for the presence of large predators like wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions. I had read a great deal. I was well-intentioned. I was earnest.

I was a nitwit.

While I lived and worked for a bit on the Hamiltons’ ranch—all the while continuously spouting my ideas for perfect ecological-community harmony—Richard and Carol made sure that book learning met reality. I emptied the pig bucket under the sink; I sat in the saddle as long as they did and with equally frozen extremities; and I manned the deworming gun in the corral, even if Richard ended up more dewormed than the cows.



Joan and Rawhide’s Peppy Play, a.k.a. Diva. Joan was continuously spouting her ideas for perfect ecological community harmony until she met reality at the Hamilton ranch in Wyoming.

My notions were marinated in cow shit, tortured by muscle fatigue, and finally gave way to the land and people in front of me.

Am I less of an environmentalist? Probably, at least by their lights. Am I more of a human being? I think so.

None of the largest environmental groups in my country will take ownership for their colonial attitude toward rural Americans, focused for much of the last two decades on those who live in our public-lands states. There are 12 “public lands” states in the West; this means that the federal gov-

ernment controls as much as 80 percent of the land in these states and with it it controls the incomes and destinies of the rural people dependent on those lands.

The British Raj had an army with which to grind down and out the sovereignty of India; environmentalists have the press, the courts, and urban supporters who know nothing about producing the natural resources upon which we depend, but who are entirely willing to believe that their fellow citizens in the West are stupid and craven. Anthropologists call this “reterritorialization” when a dominant culture, wanting to take over the lands of a subordinate culture, tells itself a pretty little story about its own heroism in saving the savage wrong-headed natives from themselves.

The message that the “natives” hear is: “You can either make a living on our terms or you can disappear.” As one climate scientist from a rural background said to me: “Environmentalists refuse to understand that when agricultural people sit down at the bargaining table with you, they have put their entire lives on the line; in turn, they feel that environmentalists have nothing on the line, other than their intellectual pride.”

The environmental movement has long seen itself as David versus the Goliath of industry and human greed. Often, it was. But it institutionalized a perversely one-sided view of humans as always the destructive force, outside of nature instead of a participant in it, a force needing to be curbed, reduced, minimized, and—in some cases—expunged from the land.

This is the message of puritans, not humanitarians.

When institutions—religious, banking, educational, scientific—refuse to vigorously examine their own biases and cultures, they become moribund, they repeat the same old patterns, and they fail.

Until the environmental movement can take the pickax to its own deeply entrenched biases, until it can become human-centered, it will be a counterproductive force on the land, antagonizing far more people than it ever enlists. ■

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