

Permaculture and Politics

Mark Boyle

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Mark Boyle explores how the permaculture movement can learn to read the political landscape – and why it needs rewilding.

Huddled around a campfire with a group of permaculturists one cool September evening, the conversation slowly moved away from natural building techniques, perennial gardening and rewilding, and onto the spicy realm of politics. Impassioned talk of voting, capitalism and anarchism mingled with woodsmoke drifting away through the reciprocal-framed roof of our firehut. As darkness enveloped us and embers started to glow red, the conversation intrigued me. Not necessarily for the ideas that emerged, as fascinating as they were, but more for the fact that amongst this bunch of like-minded souls, opinions on big issues differed considerably – and not just from one person to the next.

More often than not, each of us expressed strongly-held views on one topic that were entirely inconsistent with thoughts we held on another. This shouldn't be surprising, considering that our politico-economic education often comes by way of a scattergun approach, encompassing a small collection of half-read books curdled with often dubious information disseminated through the media. What struck me most of all was the fact that, despite the obvious passion many permaculturists have for politics, the movement itself has thus far refrained from applying its holistic approach to the political landscape, a terrain that so greatly impacts on our ecological landscapes.

It is easy to see why permaculturists might not want to touch politics wearing anything other than a bio-hazard suit. Groucho Marx, an American comedian, once said that 'Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.' Which, let's face it, is the antithesis of everything permaculture strives for. Politics is renowned for dividing people across ideological fault lines, something movements who think of themselves as apolitical justifiably want to avoid. But one of the many reasons it divides people is because there is no deep, holistic education on the matter.

Providing such an education would be only one of many good reasons for permaculture to become politicised. Politico-economic literacy greatly influences the level of technological sophistication that permaculture-based projects are

willing to utilise; and thus, in turn, how reliant these projects are upon the industrial-scale infrastructure required to keep them in chainsaws and polytunnels. Such literacy is crucial: if we are to spend our precious lives striving to create genuinely sustainable solutions, it seems counterproductive to base them around unsustainable and destructive technologies.

This assumes, of course, that such a project can get off the ground in the first place. The viability of most start-ups is greatly affected not only by the composition of the subsoil of its prospective land, or the direction of its prevailing wind, but also – and perhaps to a larger degree – by politico-economic policies and the direction of the surrounding culture. In my experience, the contours of the political landscape are a design consideration just as much as the contours of the ecological landscape. House and land prices, along with wealth distribution, dictate how much land we can afford, if any. Planning and building authorities tell us where we can build, and how we must do it. Taxes dictate how much of our surplus must leave the system without anything necessarily coming back in return. Agricultural subsidies make it very difficult for organic and permaculture growers and farmers to compete against large-scale conventional farms if they want to sell their produce. Energy policies will dictate our future climatic conditions. The list goes on. Unless we start tackling these wider issues, our most determined and creative efforts have no chance of succeeding at scale, and permaculture’s latent potential will not be fulfilled.

Most importantly of all, our ability to skilfully read and alter the politico-economic landscape could dictate whether we even have an inhabitable planet on which to create solutions. Considering that we are living through the Age of Ecocide, the time has come for the movement to stand up and fight for what it believes in. But first it has to decide what it is it actually believes in, and this must be something which stacks up when viewed through an holistic lens.

Zone Minus 1: The Underground How to best go about integrating politics into permaculture discourse, and perhaps the Permaculture Design Course (PDC), is a big question. Whilst up until now permaculture has treated political forces as a sector – an external energy beyond its control, like the direction of the wind or the angle of the summer sun – it may be wiser to think of it as a zone,¹ something we can pro-actively shape and redesign. In much the same way that Zone 00 has been used to help us consider the influence of our inner self on the way we design our habitats (despite its inconsistency with other zones), Zone Minus 1 can be a helpful concept for bringing to mind another important realm of influence: Politics.

Let me explain. Permaculture, whether it wants to be or not, is by its very nature political. Many of us would think of it, as Toby Hemenway says, as a design of how we ‘meet human needs while preserving and increasing eco-system health’ within the landscapes and communities we live amongst. Now I don’t know about you, but that sounds like politico-economic talk to me. But can we think of the political realm as a zone?

Whilst Zones 1-5 are concerned with the land itself, Zone Minus 1 offers a consideration of what lies beneath the land. It is the underground; that area beneath even the deepest layer of soil, that affects everything above it, from soil and air quality through to our ability to build our own humble Zone 0. It ought to precede the controversial Zone 00, as our political landscape – our media, education and technology – has a profound influence on our spiritual beliefs and our emotional and psychological states. But it runs deeper than that.

Reform or Revolution? After years of working within the confines of the system myself – attempting to reform it a little here, a little there – doing my best (and failing) to preserve some of the beauty which still remains, I came to the conclusion that the powerful vested interests in business-as-usual have little intention of changing our politico-economic systems to anything like the degree it needs to if we are to create, in the words of Charles Eisenstein, ‘the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible’.² They make far too much money from industries such as fossil fuels, pharmaceuticals, warfare, the prison service, hyper-consumerism, high-tech gadgetry, inflated housing and land markets, stock markets, and weapons (to name just the worst offenders) to ever permit any deep, soulful change to the status quo. Is there a single reader here who believes that any of the main political parties have any intention of building genuinely sustainable, healthy communities that live in balance with the rest of the Great Web of Life? So why is it that, when we strive for deep-rooted change, we continue to put our faith in such errant parents?

While we continue trying to reform the unreformable (which Rosa Luxemburg argued may even be counter-productive in effecting real change), those who hold political and economic power violently wage war against all that I personally find beautiful – the wild natural world, our non-monetised personal relationships, local community, our health – even our most intimate sexual relationships. Due to political and economic policies that could be changed at the drop of a hat, over 21,000 children die daily in Africa for want of food; rainforests and woods are clearcut at untenable rates every single minute; hundreds of billions of animals are reared in cruel factory farms every year; kids and adults make our clothes in sweatshops; oceans are massacred; soil is badly eroded; hundreds of species are made extinct every week whilst the world’s oldest human cultures are homogenised by Western cultural imperialism. We persist in allowing this to happen because we’ve allowed our minds – and as a result our political activism – to become as tame as the lands we dearly want to restore to vitality.

What I am saying is that in order to protect and revitalise the Great Web of Life, we need to be willing to do whatever is necessary, to consider all approaches: even if some of those approaches may involve breaking the law. In a word, we need to root our politics in the ‘underground’. For the law – and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) may soon be a classic example of this – is increasingly set up to protect the interests of those who want to exploit and profit from the natural world, along with monetising our most intimate relationships with each other, our lands and our arts and crafts.

When laws are designed with this in mind, is it not our duty to break them?

Of course protecting what we value, in ways that are legal and nonviolent, is always the first port of call. But if these are proven to fail time and time again, then should we mindlessly continue with them? Someone who isn't Einstein once said that only an insane person could expect to do the same thing over and over again and expect vastly different results.

Even if opinions vary greatly, most people involved in permaculture realise that we need deep and radical political change. Yet no movement in history has achieved any deep, radical change through solely legal and non-violent means. Read that again. None. That is not to say that our political activities should not be nonviolent, but only to say that if it proves entirely ineffective at stopping large-scale violence towards Life then a more diverse approach is obviously more advisable. As the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela said, 'for me, nonviolence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon'.³ He is in good company: everyone from Thoreau to Dr. King Jr. – and even Mahatma Gandhi – have at some point proclaimed that we should break any law designed by the few to serve only their interests, as opposed to those of the wider organism. If nonviolence proves ineffective time and time again at stopping large-scale systemic violence, then persisting with it as a political strategy out of some delusional notion of moral purity isn't nonviolence at all; it is simply a different brand of violence, one directed towards the victims of everyday violence instead of its perpetrators.⁴

The permaculture movement urgently needs political and economic literacy. In my new book, *Drinking Molotov Cocktails with Gandhi*, a book concerned with how we tackle the institutionalised barriers to living in harmony with Life, I argue that we need to 'rewild' the political landscape. By doing so, we could create a place 'out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing'⁵ where reformers, resisters and revolutionaries unite in solidarity, each respecting the other's calling in the defence and restoration of all we claim to love.

Knowledge about how to graft apple trees is only relevant if there are humans around to do the grafting. It has been said that 'permaculture is revolution disguised as gardening'. If we are to create a politico-economic atmosphere where more people not only want to take up gardening, but have the economic capability of doing so, then we're going to need a revolution in our political and economic structures as much as in our gardens. And that revolution, like the landscapes we hope to return to health, must be diverse.

A healthy landscape includes all manner of creatures, with differing natures and functions. Whilst many may be opposed, all fit together into a harmonious web; from those with hooves, through to those with claws. A healthy society is one that recognises its diversity; that all types of people have something to contribute to its health.

It knows that the deer must be allowed to be a deer.

It also knows that the wolf must be allowed to be a wolf.

Mark Boyle lived completely without money for three years, and is author of the best-selling books, The Moneyless Man and The Moneyless Manifesto. He is a director of Streetbank, a charity that enables people across the world to share skills and resources with neighbours. Mark contributes to publications, international radio and television, and has been featured by CNN, The Telegraph, BBC, The Huffington Post, ABC and Metro.

Mark Boyle's latest book, *Drinking Molotov Cocktails with Gandhi*, price £10.95, will be published by Permanent Publications in September. It is available to pre-order now from: www.green-shopping.co.uk

1. The permaculture principle of 'Zoning' is a way of designing to maximise energy efficiency by placing activities in different zones depending on frequency of use, maintenance, visits etc.
2. *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*; Charles Eisenstein; North Atlantic Books, 2013.
3. *Long Walk to Freedom*; Nelson Mandela; Abacus, 1995.
4. *Drinking Molotov Cocktails with Gandhi*; Mark Boyle; Permanent Publications, 2015; p.15.
5. *The Essential Rumi*; Jelaluddin Rumi; Harper Collins, 2008; p.16.

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