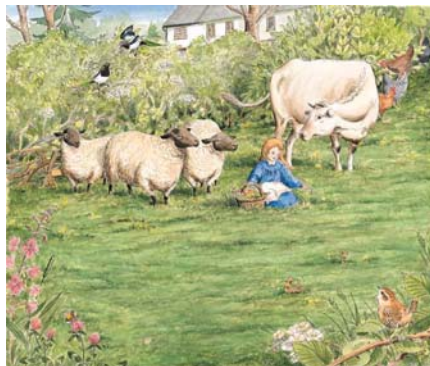


A Nation of Gardeners

by
William Shepherd

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Public Purpose

In *Good Work*, E.F.Schumacher tells a story about his first visit to Florence. Opposite the cathedral he noticed, raised up on a pedestal, the statue of a man. On consulting the Latin inscription, he was surprised to find that, far from being some official dignitary of the time or some great warrior lord, it was the architect of the cathedral. The inscription ran like this:

‘This is Arnolfo, who, instructed by the municipality of Florence to build a cathedral of such splendour that no human genius can ever surpass it, on account of the superlative endowment of his mind, proved equal to the gigantic task.’

He was instructed you see. Outside the cathedral are the famous bronze doors of Ghiberti, which took him twenty eight years to complete. There was no patronage behind it; no economist calculated that if these bronze doors were made in twenty five instead of twenty eight, the tourist trade would be increased by three years. The tourist trade has increased by three thousand percent so that you can hardly see the doors now. But that is another matter.

The trouble we have is that the moment we allow the economic calculus of the merchant or the usurer to invade everything, then nothing becomes worthwhile anymore. The contrast between *Cathedral Economics* and the peculiar modern brand of economics with its weaving together of piracy and usury can perhaps best be understood by comparing this image of Florence Cathedral with one much closer to home - our own Paternoster Square which surrounds Sir Christopher Wren’s great masterpiece for the *Diocese of London*. The plaque opposite the high rise office block buildings abutting the square would probably read like this:

‘This is Mr. R.W.Smith, member of the *Royal Institute of British Architects*, who, instructed by the *Greater London Council* to create an office block of such superlative cheapness per square foot that no human genius can ever underbid it, on account of his superb endowment with computers, proved equal to this mean task.’

Country Gardens

It is the same trouble with our farms. Our farmers are instructed to create agribusinesses. Their instructions should be to create *Country Gardens*. The instructions may not be something they see written down, like a military order, but they might as well have been. The *Pirate Economics* of the *Merchant Adventurer* and the *Usury Economics* of the *Corporate State* have a precisely similar effect. The greatest production per acre is what is demanded of the farmer.

But here is the irony. Where farming is concerned, more really is less. This is a source of considerable hope, for there are studies which show that when food production is done on a sort of family scale, intensively, then the output per acre is on the average five times as high as that of a well-run farm.

And more recent studies suggest that when the full ecological cycle of food production, animal husbandry and energy harvesting are allowed to work with each other, then, even at latitudes of fifty and sixty degrees in the middle of a New England or Scandinavian winter. Nature will happily keep right on working for us, without any farm inputs except those harnessed by the bioshelters designed by our human minds.

E.F.Schumacher saw this quite clearly a quarter of a century ago. In his essay *The Party’s Over* he points out that one particular farm input appears to have a much greater impact on farm production than any fertilizer. In the business it is known as TLC, which stands for *Tender Loving Care*. In the modern agribusiness, TLC is organised out of the system with the result that everything becomes unproductive and madly expensive. Through big mechanization, technological development, withdrawal of human labour, and the substitution of chemicals for TLC, we now have a system that bullies nature instead of working with it.

Now the question all this raises, though perhaps unexpectedly, is hardly incomprehensible. In fact it jumps out of the page at you. And it is the numbers that are talking to us. Not the money numbers of the muck and money brigade, but the food numbers of our fields and gardens.

We cannot afford agriculture, we can only afford horticulture where we get really high output per acre. We should not be asking our farmers to increase the output from agriculture. Instead we should be asking how we phase out agriculture and substitute horticulture.

But this, of course, requires a new structure, a dangerously populist type of structure, where lots of little people make loads of little profits in kind instead of a few big corporations making large loads of money profits by sacrificing quality food production on the altar of usury - for it is the predictability of nature that so attracts the

¹ *A Nation of Gardeners* was first published in *Fourth World Review* Number 31 in February 1989.

money-lender while the vagaries of man attract the pirates to, not the food markets but the food credit supermarkets. It does us no harm to be clear on these matters.

Master Gardeners

In the eighteenth century, the English were known throughout Europe as a *Nation of Shopkeepers*. Nowadays we are in danger of becoming a *Nation of Housewives*. This is no insult to women as our Head Housewife is always ready to point out. But what of our menfolk? H.G.Wells, in a little noticed aside in *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* observed that history really boils down to the matter of what societies find to do with their young men. Our women have sound instincts in wanting to get them out of the house every morning.

We must start asking ourselves what becomes of a society when its menfolk have little useful work, being instead subjected to a progressive demasculation of their world by genderless skills and female attitudes to work. The old men die, but the young do not roll over so easily.

Our traditional wisdoms attribute to men the role of specialist and to women the role of generalist. Men are known for their extravagance; women for their thrift. Men have their public houses; women look after the private home. Men look out for the enemy without; women are ever watchful for the enemy within. The man is the breadwinner; the woman the meal-maker.

And, try as the feminists might, our womenfolk will never give up their legitimate gendered domain of the private house and the private garden. That is all well and good. But we must see to it that the men get back their legitimate gendered domain of the public house and the public garden. It is not the women who have taken this from them but the grasping claw of the *Megamachine* with its tithes and taxes; its myths and its monies; and, lurking always just round the corner, its sophists and its sheriffs.

In a *Cathedral Culture*, in each village and each urban parish, we would find a *Master Gardener*. He would be instructed by the municipality to create a *Country Garden*. He would be given the menfolk to help him do it. For the *Country Garden* demanded of him would be one of such splendour that no human genius could ever surpass it. If he is to prove equal to this gigantic task, he will need to draw on the great extravagance of nature and the superlative endowment of the human mind.

But there is something else besides. And that something else is the masculine attributes of strength and ingenuity. Not a woman's strength of woman's ingenuity, which is directed always towards woman's purposes. But that strength of personal detachment and the *Yankee ingenuity*; the cleverness with tools that has traditionally marked off the male hero from the female heroine.

Farms for People

The French laughed at our nation of shopkeepers. No doubt they will laugh at a nation of gardeners and fishermen too. But, then as now, they will fail to see that our little shops and our little boats were our strength because it means we had only little surpluses and little shortages. The French have now turned their little country markets into one enormous *Common Market* and are fast turning their little peasant farms into one gigantic *Common Farm*. Our head housewife might like it, but our menfolk are not so sure.

Not so long from now, our oil wells will run dry and the *Common Farm* will have nothing to ship to the *Common Market*. That is when the womenfolk will come to take notice of what some of the men were thinking back in the roaring eighties. Meanwhile, our job is to make sure that when the ladies put out their distress calls, the menfolk are ready to respond. Because when the time comes, then as always, a man will do what a man must do, although this time round it will be the barns and not the barricades that need manning. Our king will realise it, but can we rely on his courtiers?

When cathedrals were built, those who built them did not budget them. They said: 'Only the best is good enough. Only that which can be offered to the glory of God is worthy of the dignity of man'. In these *Cathedral Cultures* a firm distinction was made between *Ephemeral Goods*, produced in order that they should be destroyed, and *Eternal Goods*, which are not to be destroyed.

Food may be an ephemeral good, but a country garden, like a cathedral, is an eternal good. And in all cultures these eternal goods are taken outside the economic calculus. 'Each person is a universe and cannot be treated as a unit', they would say. Or 'eternity cannot be calculated'. And so in a *Cathedral Culture*, when it comes to ephemeral goods, you live frugally in accordance with the idea of modesty and in distrust of excess, be it too much or too little. Beauty is the splendour of goodness and there is a 'certain limit' beyond which neither goodness nor beauty are possible.

Our ancient histories are very clear on these matters. The medieval church made sure that the harvest was gathered in before putting our ancestors to work on the cathedrals. And, further afield, the Chinese, somewhat more inscrutably, set every fourth child to work on a great wall. Our ancient wisdoms were quite clear. The gardens came before the temples.

But we must not, for all that, think that we can dismiss economics. Cathedrals have their economics too, as do virtuous communities. But these are not the *Pirate Economics* or the *Usury Economics* we are being force-fed, because these relate to the old structures, the structures of a dying civilization, not those of a living culture.

For these we require to listen first to the poet. From *Canto the First* of my *Ode to the Common Man* we have these two lines:

‘Farms for People! Towns for Free!
Robots in Mine and Factory!’

Or in the words of the *Liverpool Troubadour*, John Lennon:

‘The queen is in the counting home, counting out the money;
The king is in the kitchen, making bread and honey;
No friends and yet no enemies, absolutely free;
No rats aboard the magic ship of (perfect) harmony.
Now it begins.
Clean-up Time.
Show those mothers how to do it.’

Five Acres & a Cow²

Most party politicians, mass media commentators and corporate executives are genuinely perplexed by the antics of our apathetic youth as they drag their anarchist circus around the globe from Seattle to Washington, Prague, Nice, London, Gothenburg and Genoa. ‘What a nerve!’ they cry. ‘How dare they pitch their tents across the street from our luxury hotels and disrupt our democratic deliberations!’

I was first introduced to the full force of the *World Trade Organisation’s Multinational Agreement on Investments (MAI)* in the summer of 1998 at a seminar put on by the *Swedish Green Party* for *Almedalsveckan* on the Baltic island of Gotland. During the seminar it was pointed out that had this agreement been in force during South Africa’s apartheid regime, all government boycotts and sanctions against South Africa would have been illegal...with the result that apartheid might still be the policy and Nelson Mandela still in jail.

Nor was this the least of it. States rights in the USA would have gone out the bathroom window as no country or city would have been allowed to introduce zoning laws or permits favouring its own nationals or local residents. As for notions such as community reinvestment acts, these too would have been outlawed along with anything else that sought to shift the balance of power away from outside interests and in favour of locality.

Unfortunately there is too little recognition of the extent to which governments...and in particular *Big Government* as a species of governance...have brought this corporate backlash upon themselves by their ‘rule of lawyers’ and their ‘government by regulation’. But a response that sets a new corporation-friendly set of regulations against the old government-friendly regulations is not the answer.

If we are to grapple seriously with the global crisis, which is first and foremost a crisis of power brought on by giantism, then we must go further and come to terms with the ‘Who? Whom?’ of the regulating process itself. Who has power over whom? With whom do they wield it? And to what ends? Not that this is the first time that the question of ‘the rule of law’ has boiled down to the rather different question of ‘who’s law rules’. Sir Thomas More run foul of an earlier engagement.

But there are grounds for hope because as legitimacy drifts away from the *WTO’s* member governments so niches will start to open up for legitimate governance representing real people in real communities. Before long someone will need to invent the idea of *The League of Real Nations* to help these new nations fight their corners. The side effects may be the main effects and the bad news may not turn out to be so bad after all. Nor is that the only piece of good news in these troubled times.

Quite unwittingly, the New York lawyers commissioned by the *WTO* to draft their *Charter for Corporate Global Business* have done a tremendous job on our behalf. In aikido terms, this *MAI* provides an excellent first draft for a *Real Communities Charter*. Power only flows one way at a time, so by shifting the nexus of power in the *MAI* from the *World Trade Organisation (WTO)* to a myriad of *Village Common Sense Trusts*...and this can be done by inserting a few ‘not’s and ‘no’s here and there and reversing the flow of power in most of its clauses...we will have a manifesto for globalising economic activity within the confines of our own little local worlds...many millions of them...each stretching little further than 35 miles from where we live. Once these are in place ‘locality’ could come into its own and begin its long fight back against ‘interests’...particularly those of the ‘riding roughshod over’ type.

Localization with self-sufficiency has the potential to cause much more damage to the anarchy of corporate power, with its mindless pursuit of bigger and bigger profits, than any anti-capitalist protest. Besides, what would better

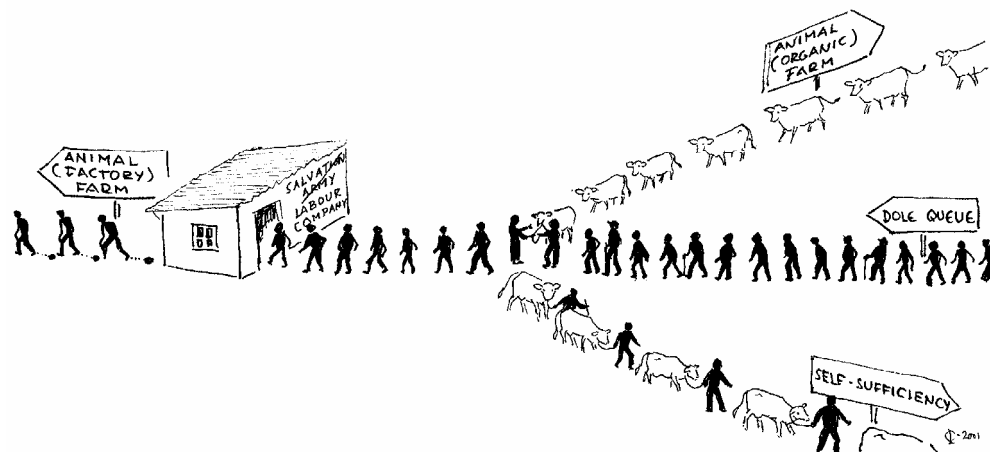
² A postscript was added to *A Nation of Gardeners* twelve years later in 2001 following the inclusion of two reports that developed the theme: *The Wealth of Counties* and *Five Acres and a Cow* in the *Proceedings of the Radical Consultation*.

revitalise national democracy in these time of electoral apathy...where the turn-out at elections in many countries is now sliding towards the 50% of that beacon of democracy the United States of America...than voting for parliaments that have the real power to choose between two identical charters; the one...where all the votes are...giving sovereignty to local communities; and the other ceding power and sovereignty to boardroom barons shuffling papers behind closed doors...and steel barricades...in unhealthy buildings?!

And what better way for a county (*sic!*) to deal with the bad new times ahead than by issuing five acres and a cow instead of the dole to its younger citizens. There is no reason why the Queen should not carry on sending telegrams to our mothers on their hundredth birthday. But her son would be better advised to devote himself to doling out cows and land deeds to every able-bodied male in his kingdom on their eighteenth birthday. Any Lord Lieutenant of the County that managed to push this through County Hall would soon be the envy of the country. 'All power to the parish' is the fastest way to ensure that all wealth stays in the county!

Further Reading © William Shepherd 2008

1. *The Land Issue*: Henry George & Halford Mackinder; Fabian Papers; Tudor Times; Purpose & Meaning.
2. *England's Landed Property*: Introduction; The Paine Plan; Landed Property; Money Wars; The Local Front.



3. *The Wealth of Counties*. In 1795 Tom Paine wrote a short book entitled *Agrarian Justice* which provides a grounding in his *Economic Arithmetic*. This paper takes a long view on the *County of Kent...the Garden of England...* by looking at it from a 'painian' perspective. Any county with the foresight to introduce ecological sanity by way of *Agenda 21* could take a similar approach to economic sanity...without waiting for a *Rio Summit* to give them permission. The English counties need a calculus to assess their monetary needs. Here is one way to go about the task.

4. *Five Acres & A Cow: in Praise of the Peasant Economy*: a research report prepared on behalf of the *Cliff's Edge Signalling Company (cesc)*; Contents: Introduction; 1. Cow Worship; 2. Cow Ardy?; 3. Cow Buying; 4. Cow Lessons; 5. Cow Work; 6. Cow Costs; 7. Cow Products; 8. Cow Trading; 9. Cow Profits; 10. Cow (Im)pacts.

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About the Author



William Shepherd is an English radical economist living in Rye, Sussex. Born at the end of the Hitler War, he is a regular contributor to *Fourth World Review* and the author of *The Rise & Fall of the Swedish Green Party (1982-1997)* published in 1989. He manages *Academic Inn Books* and the *Cliff Edge Signalling Company (cesc)*. His two grown-up children are bilingual in English and Swedish. [2001]

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