

## Engagement with the Real World

It not only takes all kinds.. but it also has all kinds. The problem is that the different approaches don't seem to be working in tandem, or even towards something.

The Land Institute is working on germ plasm because they believe that in a 25 to 50 year time frame, it's possible to build an agriculture based on the way natural ecosystems work. But some people in the 'movement', may look down upon this as 'non-activism'.

Wes Jackson, co-founder of the Land Institute feels that even though they are marginal, one reason that they are still alive as a viable organization is not only that they have an alternative paradigm but there is pollen being transferred on behalf of that paradigm.

The Land Institute aims to pursue a long-term solution to the problem of agriculture, delving into both the scientific and cultural aspects. The goal, articulated in the Land Institute's mission statement, is agriculture that will allow people, communities, and the land to prosper in sustainable fashion

The truth is when you build, it is politics – at least a statement of your politics! Whether you build for yourself, your immediate friends' circle. Or society at large.

Similarly, in building alternative social, economic and political structures one can follow the lonely (but satisfying) path of splendid isolation; one can follow the sometimes ascetic, often glamorous, militant (and satisfying) path of resistance; or one can follow the path of constructive engagement (also very satisfying) also sometimes glamorous and high profile.

Sustainability demands that each of these paths is taken by some element or the other in society.

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The interview with **Wes Jackson** by **Robert Jensen** (a non-war collective journalist) reminds us that the path to alternatives cannot be built solely in ascetic isolation or rejection. He also warns that when one is engaged in an alternative or in direct politics, one should do what one enjoys doing, not just that which is billed as being 'noble'. Whichever path one chooses, one needs to constantly engage oneself with the system, not being overwhelmed or seduced by it, but to promote the alternative that will become the norm, that will be the mainstream.

And we need to keep talking among ourselves – 'preaching to the choir' – we need to constantly deepen our own understanding and practice of what alternatives, sustainability, equity mean in living in the real world, a world peopled by ordinary decency and values.



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**Where Agriculture meets Empire: Interview with Wes Jackson** 

by Robert Jensen Posted on Alternet, July 1, 2003.

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/%7Erjensen/freelance/wesjackson.htm> [C.ELDOC6008723]

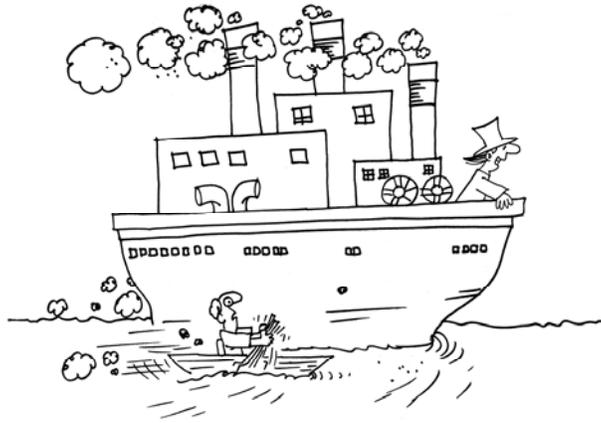
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## Where Agriculture meets Empire

*Robert Jensen interviews Wes Jackson*

**At the 25th anniversary celebration you offered three aphorisms that seem to turn conventional political wisdom on its head – “If we walk our talk, we won’t get there,” “We need to spend more time preaching to the choir,” and “We’ve got to quit meeting people where they are.” Explain what you meant.**

“If we walk our talk, we won’t get there” is the easy one. Look, I ride jet planes. I drive. My household is tied into the grid. We’re all dependent on the extractive economy. If we were to “walk the talk” – if we were to really live within the limits of a renewal life-support system with no subsidies from coal



or portable liquid fuels or the poison of nuclear power – we would have trouble making our voices heard in the culture.

Another way to put it is that there’s no life outside the system. So, I think we should ask two questions about endeavors that involve us in the extractive

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economy. One is, “How can I use this non-renewable resource in a strategic way?” Two, “Is it so much fun that you can’t say no to it?” That second one is just a way of not taking ourselves too seriously.

**What about the people who say that it’s important to create alternatives that are, to the degree possible, outside the system? Should people sacrifice involvement in a political movement to create a model of something else?**

We do need those good examples, and people have to work in the area of their passion. When I look at people I start with the question, “Have they joined the fight?” If they have, then you have to be careful in critique, because we don’t know enough about what’s going to be most effective in the long run. If someone wants to be the good example, then fine. *But I think they should be doing it out of intrinsic interest, not out of sense of nobility.*

**What about, “We need to spend more time preaching to the choir”?**

That’s meant to suggest we need to deepen the discussion. The modern environmental movement really began in 1962 with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Before that, environmentalism was mostly about wilderness advocacy, with some focus on soil erosion and water conservation. ... we have to fight the idea that nature is to be subdued or ignored. In that older view, wilderness was seen as the sacred, and we could afford to allow other parts of the world that served human needs and desires to be profane. Now we realize the planet is seamless and that wilderness is really an artifact of civilization. *So, we haven’t had a long enough time to deepen the discussion, and that deepening is best done with members of the choir, rather than with people who are just catching on that the planet is in trouble.*



There’s a lot of work for the choir to do, too. *For example, we have to learn to be better numbersmiths, to understand science and statistics. I’m going to be 67 this month, and in my lifetime people have burned 97.5 percent of all the oil that has ever been burned. That’s an important statistic. We*

have to face the fact that we are not going to find a technological substitute for the high-density energy that comes out of a gas or oil well. It is thermodynamically implausible. We have not attended to these numbers and realities. So, we have people running around rather glibly saying that, “We have alternatives. We just need to get solar and wind and thermal insulation and this, that and the other.”

**What do you say to those who contend that there are energy alternatives that will allow Americans to continue to consume at the current level?**

I say that’s nuts. That’s where the discussion needs to deepen. Take the example of a photovoltaic array and look at the energy that the array will produce in its lifetime and the energy it takes to make it. It’s assumed, because scarcity is always said to be the mother of invention, that when things get scarce we will find the alternative. Well, I’m saying there simply is no alternative to the density of high-energy carbon coming out of an oil well.



**Do you think there is a need to preach to the choir in other movements, such as the antiwar or anti-corporate globalization movements?**

I think so. It’s clear that war and racism, poverty, sexism, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, are all connected. And when we hit a brick wall, it turns out that brick wall is capitalism. We’re going to have to face that. *But people want to believe it is possible to design around capitalism, through regulation and progressive legislation. But that won’t work, and we need some consciousness-raising on that.*



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**What about the third slogan, “We’ve got to quit meeting people where they are”?**

If you meet people where they are, you’re going to meet them in Wal-Mart, where things are cheap and things don’t last. We keep trying to meet people on the grounds of economics: Are they going to have more money so they can eat out more often and buy more breakables? In that framework, the ecology message is reduced to hoping that the EPA does a better job of enforcing the Clean Water Act and the Clear Air Act. But the planet could still go down the tubes with clean water and clean air, and with wind generators in place. We’ve not talked about a society that, at the rate it’s going, it is going to require four planets to keep up with consumption.

The day after 9/11, I wrote a piece suggesting that what George Bush should say is, “My fellow Americans, from this day forward we will evaluate our progress by how independent of the extractive economy we have become.” *I think that kind of speech would resonate with a lot of people. But if it resonates, then they have to roll up their sleeves and say, “What does that mean for me, for us?” That would not be meeting people where they are.* George Bush is meeting people where they are.

**One possible conclusion from all this is that, given where the culture and most people are, a mass movement around sustainability isn’t possible today. Is that your view?**

Let me be more positive. A mass intellectual engagement on these issues is possible and is necessary. I don’t know if is possible right now. My hope is that when the resource base declines and we are caught – and it will appear to be unawares – there will have been going on in smaller circles an adequate deepening of the conversation that has the potential to spread among the larger population.

**Any thoughts on how to go forward with that?**

One thing to avoid is getting too overloaded with abstractions, without any of the particulars. *This struggle that we're involved in is not going to be won with the bumper sticker. It's going to be won across the ecological mosaic of the country; it's going to be the particularities. I'm worried about our willingness to so readily embrace the abstractions without the particularities.*

Now, some of the people in the environmental movement, some who are my friends, think that they are change agents and are out there networking, going off to another conference. *I don't object to people doing those kinds of things – I do some of that myself -- but what I do object to is the marginalization of an organization like ours because we say it will take 25 to 50 years before we have something to offer the farmer. My question for almost any group is, "What does this translate into in a material way?"*

We need to be saying, "Listen folks, capitalism is inherently destructive." How do we get from where we are to where we need to be, keeping in mind that we can't just try to tame that son of a bitch. We have got to get rid of capitalism.

**Do you have any thoughts on what an alternative to capitalism would look like?**

I think that if we don't get sustainability in agriculture first, it's not going to happen. We have some disciplines standing behind and, potentially, helping agriculture – ecology, evolutionary biology. So that is where it seems to me the discussion has to start.

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