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Agrarian Anxieties Harper's Magazine Notebook (July 1010)

by Steven Stoll

Whenever we seek control over our tiny scrap of the universe, we create hybrids - not fuel-efficient cars or cross-pollinated flora but composites of nature and culture that we stitch together, bring to life, and imagine serve us rather than stalk us. The warming atmosphere, our most spectacular hybrid, developed for a century without anyone noticing it, because we took for granted that the earth flourished under industrial progress. Pesticides and antibiotics offer another example, since they stimulate the evolution of chemical-resistant organisms. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico might look like a singular event, but the assumptions that led up to it have existed unexamined for decades. We invent these monsters without intending to and ignore them for as long as possible with the self-deceiving certainty that they cannot or will not harm us. Something peculiar about being modern, reasons the philosopher Latour, has led us to believe that the environment conforms to the social order as part of an elaborate pageant of progress.

It would be easy to argue, as many have, that Judeo-Christian religions, in their insistence that human domination of the planet is by, divine decree, have created these and other hybrids. But reservations about nature-culture hybrids go back to the very origins of this religious tradition. The Bible crackles with alarm over fratricide and genocide, over the violent assemblage of kingdoms as commanded by the warrior-god, and over the accumulation of wealth - all linked to the most destructive and socially transforming technology ever invented: agriculture. People with an oral history of that Great Transition feared that the imperatives of the plow would tear apart an older world or that they already had. This revolution, for centuries exalted as the necessary condition of modern civilization, without which there could be no great cities or accumulation of wealth, looked more like a weapon of mass destruction to people closer to its invention. In their cautionary tales and utopian laws, we moderns might find a way to recognize and control our hybrids before they devour us.

In Eden, that favored couple gather all they need without hunger or toil; they dwell in harmony with all Creation. Their abrupt expulsion from that kindly wilderness is an allegory of the Neolithic transition. No Arcadia awaits them; instead, they and their descendants will scrape, dig, and struggle for every meal. They will stoop with sweat on their faces.

The first couple moves from one allegorical space to another. They beget the material and political archetypes of the Bronze Age: Cain (or Kayin) the farmer and Abel (Hevel) the herder, who then contend over which one will spawn future nations. God loves Abel's burnt offerings but rejects Cain's. No reason is given, but it may well be that Abel's spotless lamb represents a more substantial portion of his good fortune - literally, a greater sacrifice - because it contains more energy and nutrients than a bundle of wheat. God tells Cain to get over it, but Cain broods, and then bludgeons his brother to death. The killing of Abel marks the beginning of the association of shepherds with peace and innocence and of farmers with violence. God knows exactly how to punish the first murderer: "When you wish to work the soil it will not henceforth give its strength to you; wavering and wandering must you be on earth!" Cain cries back that the sentence is more than he can stand. "Whoever! comes upon me will kill me!" But the voice from the void protects him.

Only a God with some pragmatic motive would have let Cain live. God knows that farmers become many and overwhelm hunters and herders with their numbers. The fearsome growth of agrarians - fueled by wheat, rice, and maize and driven by the need for fresh land - pushes them ever farther east of Eden and into bloody territorial wars. Genesis is all about population as destiny. Cain emerges as an ambiguous

symbol of the victory of farming over herding. Cursed and indispensable, he wanders away to found the first city and his own branch of humanity - not merely by heredity but by the arts his progeny devises. A seventh-generation descendant, Yuval, invents music. Yuval's half-brother, Tuval-Kayin (who bears the name of his lineage), becomes a "burnisher of every blade of bronze and iron". Cain gives rise to the division of labor and to the agrarian economy that eventually takes over the world.

Then the agrarian God starts over by drowning everyone but the members of one family. His orders to them are unequivocal. As soon as the ark lands on firm ground and releases its smelly cargo, God tells Noah that sowing and harvesting will never again cease and that Noah has a new mission: "Fear-of-you, dread-of-you shall be upon all the wildlife of the earth and upon all the fowl of the heavens ... I now give you all". Seize it! plant it! rule it! "Swarm on the earth and become many on it!" The flood annihilated Cain's descendants but not his errand, which passes to Noah. According to one Jewish legend, Noah invented the plow, scythe, and hoe - the tools for appropriating the landscape. The flood did not just clear away the wicked; it made possible a more aggressive peopling.

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Although much is unclear about the jubilee year, it constitutes nothing less than the first land-reform measure. The upshot was a legal mechanism for preventing class differences, and breakaway city-states. As people changed over from gathering with a little planting on the side to planting almost full-time, the relationship between land and labor also changed. Slavery, dispossession, empire - all can be understood as rational adaptations to a new world in which the intensive occupation of land became the basis of wealth and sovereignty. The Israelites sensed the opportunity in and the dangers of that new order. They had observed much and learned a few strokes from the Egyptians, but they clearly did not want to set off a process of inequality that might turn them into Pharaohs. The Israelites recognized farming as a potentially devastating hybrid, a regime made from equal parts nature and culture, and they realized that the very thing that made them powerful also made them vulnerable.