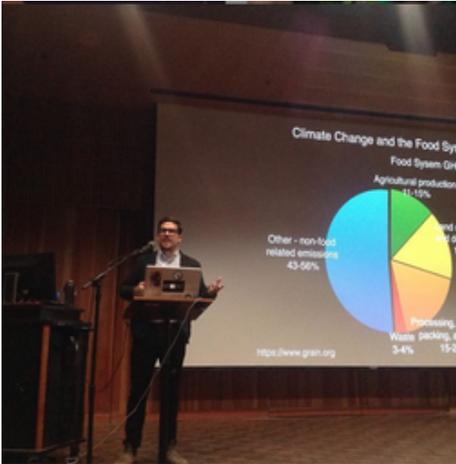


# Liberation Ecology

06/16/2020



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As our communities re-emerge into the sunlight from our lockdowns, put away the latex gloves, explore new greetings of elbow taps, and remove our masks to reveal our faces, what world will we walk into? More importantly, what future will we help create? We have been stripped of our previous reality and as each day passes, we have begun to question how ideal that reality actually was. Do we want a future of endless consumption and removed consequences? Of turning a blind eye to racism and social injustice? Did we enjoy our fossil-fuel-dependent hour-long commute to our eight-hour work days? As we venture ahead, stripped naked and wide-eyed, we have an unprecedented opportunity to take a long, hard look our operating systems and apply the permaculture principle of creatively using and responding to change.

And change is happening. Many governments around the world are turning away from fossil fuels towards rebuilding in a way that addresses both climate change adaptation and mitigation. Cities are closing streets to cars and opening them to pedestrians and cyclists. Community supported agriculture shares with local farmers have increased as much as 300 percent in our country. This disruption is a time to question and create. We are questioning our languages. Our colonialist roots and the biases and racism that have been passed down to us. We are questioning online shopping and political corruption. We are moving towards better alternatives and it turns out

that what is better for us is better for our earth – we are integrated, not segregated.

When first learning about permaculture design, landscaping is the gateway through which most of us apply the design framework. The systems-level thinking that ensues after immersing in a permaculture design course can be so profound that we gravitate towards landscaping as something concrete in which to apply our new ways thinking. We question, ‘why weren’t we taught this in over a decade’s worth of sitting in classrooms?’ Many then scale up the application to redesigning our economic systems. To rethinking our language and inherited biases. To assessing our daily patterns and our governmental structures. The opportunities to restructure, especially following disruption, are endless.

Rafter Ferguson, scientist in the Food and Environment program with the Union of Concerned Scientists, is applying systems-level thinking to support shifts in federal policy. His focus lies in bridging agroecology and food systems research with social justice and racial equity. According to Rafter, “Before permaculture, I was not especially interested in the natural sciences. My undergrad was in anthropology--basically a social science, social theory major. When I encountered permaculture, I was thinking about the ways in which we are all tied into this system of industrial capitalism, a system that is terrible for us and is undermining the foundations that make our lives possible, but at the same time that we depend on.” Rafter has scaled up his thinking.

Of core importance to his work is the ability “to think carefully and critically about human-environment relationships and the role that they play in keeping people subjugated and exploited versus on a path to liberation.” When he learned about permaculture, he discovered “a way of thinking that...is responding to [environmental and ecological issues] in a way that is very pro-social. There is lots of room for community organization, for all sorts of human liberation projects within that. It’s not just like ‘civilization is evil and it should just fall.’”

In taking his PDC in Argentina with Peter Bane (author of *The Permaculture Handbook* <http://permaculturehandbook.com/>) and others, Rafter was energized and excited about the new lens in which he was seeing the world. “Despite having four years plus of undergraduate education, I had never encountered any systems thinking.” What followed was a learning journey of travel and study for several years, where he “started trying to develop a design-oriented, systems-oriented way of talking about [privilege and oppression].” This would allow him to take race and class-conscious movement building

strategies and introduce them into a PDC context “in a way that can resonate with the reasons people are there—with their desires for their own lives and with their desires for change, rather than just being like ‘oh and by the way, you should feel bad and maybe those bad feelings will get you to behave differently.’”

“The work that I feel is important, and that I’m motivated to put my attention on, is centered on supporting and amplifying people of color-led movements, as opposed to trying to work strictly within the majority-white permaculture milieu, to herd a million cats to orient more toward people of color leadership. There are already all these incredibly dynamic projects happening—a renaissance of Black agrarian projects, movement building, organizing, and scholarship. [See below for resources.] Some of these folks have actually filtered through the permaculture movement and been like ‘this actually isn’t for us,’ and begun identifying more with agroecology and afro-ecology and other ways of thinking that aren’t overwhelmingly white.”

What follows is one of the most powerful reflections I observed in my many travels throughout my sabbatical journey. It was an appropriate way to cap my interview journey and perhaps, like me, it will get you thinking more deeply about applying systems thinking to enact largescale change. “Permaculture is an amazing tool for shifting worldview, for giving people new ways to think about the environment and their relationships with it, and larger social relationships with that. I think that the primary barriers, the most formidable barriers to change right now are political. By which I mean the capture of our entire political and regulatory system by capital—by people and institutions with a very strong interest in limiting change. If we zoom in on those political barriers, the main thing that’s preventing us from effective large scale collective political action is white supremacy, and the way that so many white people throughout the country either explicitly blame people of color for the problems we face, or are full of confusion and anxiety that implicitly prevent them from fully apprehending their shared humanity and common interests with people of color. So, given that the large mass of white Americans have been dissuaded from finding common cause with people of color, especially with Black Americans... This is the most powerful tool the elite could possibly wield in this country and they are wielding it very effectively. For me, connecting to that issue is the primary thing for determining my personal compass of whether my own or other people’s work is really relevant to the issues at hand. So, I think the degree to which people within the permaculture community are able to find their way to that understanding, and figure out how to take effective action around that... That’s precisely

the degree to which I think permaculture is really relevant to the crisis that we are in right now. To be clear, the worldview shift that permaculture is so great at facilitating is a really valuable one and it was incredibly influential for me. Even when I talk about this Black and brown-centered and led agrarian movement—there are some folks in this space that in some way did come through permaculture, and were affected by that way of thinking, and then grew beyond it and found ways that were more grounded in their own histories and diasporas. It’s a powerful force and I think it’s generally a force for good. Take this idea, that’s part of permaculture, that the most effective and powerful interventions into the global crises we are facing are through very local actions—maybe in our own yards or maybe on the community scale; and therefore we don’t have to wait for the involvement or approval of any institutions to take action. I think that’s a powerful and exciting concept that really mobilizes people along the dimensions of that kind of work. But there’s also this resignation in permaculture that since our institutions are all hopelessly compromised, we should all go off and remake our new society over here on the margins. I don’t think that way of working is sufficient for the scale of crises that we are facing. Maybe if we had 500 years to incrementally shift things and gradually do that. But we can’t simply ignore the institutions that we currently have as much as they might suck. And I do think they suck.”

We all possess degenerative thinking patterns. Feeling shame about that, however, ultimately gets in the way of the more important work of establishing new ways of thinking and mobilizing positive change.

To discover more about Rafter, [check out his work](#) with Union of Concerned Scientists, [his research on permaculture](#), visit his personal website at [liberationecology.org](http://liberationecology.org), or read [Toward 21st Century Permaculture: Peoples' Science or Pseudoscience](#)

#### Further Reading:

- [A New Generation of Black Farmers Is Returning to the Land](#), Leah Penniman
- [Towards a “Peoples” Agroecology](#), Blain Snipstal
- [Want to See Food and Land Justice for Black Americans? Support These Groups](#), the Civil Eats Editors
- [Why We Can't Separate Justice and Sustainability in the Food System](#), Rafter Ferguson



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