

Interview with Kirkpatrick Sale

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Interview with Kirkpatrick Sale

■ **Arthur Versluis**, *Michigan State University*

Kirkpatrick Sale's writing career began in the early 1970s, his first major book being *SDS*, the first extensive history of that seminal political movement. Over the ensuing decades, he has continued to publish influential books, especially on bioregionalism and ecological issues, but early in the twenty-first century, he became active in the North American secessionist movement. He founded the Middlebury Institute, devoted to the ethos of decentralization, and organized secessionist conferences that brought together all the major and disparate secessionist groups in the United States, perhaps the most vigorous of which is the movement for the Second Vermont Republic. Over the course of the interview, we discussed the range of Sale's many books, and how his more abstract points in them about bioregionalism and ecological issues become practically expressed by way of the secessionist movement that he now champions. We sat together in his booklined study, behind us dense woods visible through the window, and began by reflecting on the New Left in relation to his more recent and more radical work.

AV: I'm sitting in the study with Kirkpatrick Sale. I wanted to start by just asking you about SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and your 1973 book *SDS*. Looking back on that subject—now roughly a third of a century later—what do you think about the SDS and the New Left? Because at the time you concluded the book with this assertion about the SDS–Weatherman saga: “whether from its legacy will evolve a new organization and new leftward spirit to carry on the task SDS began, only the future can tell, but it's certain this is the place to begin.” Do you still think this, looking back at SDS?

KS: I haven't thought anything about SDS, really, in recent years. There was a movie, *Rebels With a Cause*, that was made several years ago, and there was a reunion in New York of New York-area SDS people. And what was interesting about it is that they were still working in their various ways to do the kind of things that SDS had done, particularly in its earlier and middle periods. There were none working at the revolution "Weather style," but they were doing other kinds of things. So in a sense you could say that that was the legacy of SDS, and that it is still alive and well, but of course there is not on campuses the kind of fervor that there used to be.

As far as I can tell, the anti-Iraq movement is pretty quiet. Obviously, if there was a draft, everything would change overnight—that was one of the main reasons for the success of SDS originally—but there is enough interest going on, on campuses for there to be a new SDS being organized this academic year. I don't know with what success exactly. *The Nation* had an article on the several dozen campuses [where students] are trying to start chapters. Two freshmen came to me last summer and interviewed me for a couple of hours, trying to tease out what was the successful part of SDS and what was the sort of thing that they could do nowadays to revive a Left on American campuses. I told them that I thought they should organize around making each campus green and bioregional. That is to say, all the food at the campus should be grown in the region, and all of the energy should be produced within that region. Any building would be green, but it would also be local. That has not in fact been the kind of action that they have taken, but it is available still, and I think it would be very successful. I haven't gotten a report back yet from these two students. They promised to come at the end of the year, which should be around now, and tell me how they have done, so I am still to hear about that. But that would be a different kind of SDS than the original one.

AV: It would be quite different, it strikes me, because the original SDS and the Weatherman group, as well, really weren't concerned with ecological questions or bioregionalism. That seemed pretty foreign to them.

KS: That's right, in fact, I can remember that there was a resistance to Earth Day in 1970—the very first Earth Day—by the Left, and I shared a little of that, although I was there at the New York Earth Day demonstration that kicked all of this off. But there was a resistance on the Left, a feeling that this was a sort of irrelevant "liberal-do-goodism," but I don't think that that's true anymore. So it would be a different kind of SDS. The power of SDS really grew from larger considerations like the war and civil rights and the compliancy of the

university in the war, but not with strictly local university-wide considerations. But I think that as the times have changed, this would make very good politics: to operate in a way to make the university green and communitarian, and ultimately work towards self-sufficiency. The goal of that obviously would be to disenthral the university from the governmental capitalist system of which it is such an intimate part. So there is a very strong political component to trying to make the university an independent grove of academe rather than a servant of the corporate and political state.

AV: Effectively, what you're talking about is a group that has the name SDS, but is a fundamentally different ecological communitarian and also potentially academic movement. I'm not sure it actually will go that way, but I suspect that the new SDS movement will carry on a great deal or at least a significant part of that earlier New Left agenda, which is still tied in to the industrial commercial system in some respects. Some time ago, we interviewed Bill Ayers, and we were discussing the history of the Weather Underground. One of the questions that we asked Ayers had to do with the consequences of the Weather group, whether ultimately it was a counterproductive movement that actually set the Left back.

KS: As to the Weather people, I think that was a total mistake, and although I had some sympathy with why they went that way, it destroyed SDS and destroyed itself and simply tarred the Left and the New Left with an awful curse of that association with violence. That was a great mistake, and it seems a great shame, but it is perfectly understandable when you have tried reform, and you've tried resistance, and the war goes on, and the universities go on helping the war, and blacks are still second-class citizens, and prejudice is still shot through the entire system. Eventually, you have to think of something else to do, and revolution is one of those available ideas. Although clearly the time was not right for any such thing, and the means of trying to launch it, by running through high schools or setting off bombs, were pathetic and doomed to failure. And alas, that operation took down all of SDS, so there was no organized New Left presence in the seventies when it could have been very valuable.

AV: In his memoir *Fugitive Days*, Ayers talks about the process that the group went through—that is to say the Weatherman group—and this sort of movement toward violence. It struck me, as he was talking about it, that it was similar in some ways with what you saw with the Japanese group Aum Shinrikyo. There was a deconditioning process that they deliberately went

through in order to get to the point of actually committing violence; they had to go through a series of stages. A similar process would have to take place for a group to become violent. The relevance of this is that there are ecological groups today—or individuals—that are advocating violence, so it isn't just a matter of looking back historically at the curse or the dead-end of the Weatherman movement. It's a fact that—for example, Derrick Jensen, in his quite recent book [*Endgame* (2006)], overtly endorsed a bombing campaign and organizing anarchist cells, in order to potentially bring down the industrial system. One also has groups like the Earth Liberation Front who target buildings, and I wondered what your thoughts were on that. Because that bears, to some extent I think, a relationship to the earlier movement of the Weather Underground, so I wondered what your thoughts are on the ecological groups, some of them with primitivist leanings, who are going in that direction?

KS: It's certainly true that the same sense of frustration is leading the environmental people to violence. You try to burn down a Humvee dealership because that kind of transportation represents everything that is evil about the system and what it's doing to the Earth, but it's as futile and unproductive as the kinds of bombings that SDS—the Weather people—did. I wrote about ELF [Earth Liberation Front] when it was in the news, when there were a number of people who were setting fire to places, and it seemed to me that these were quite futile actions. If you did burn down a Humvee dealer, what effect exactly would that have on the world, on the environment? It seemed to me that these ELF actions were tiny scratches against a system that needed to be confronted, but not in that fashion. It would seem to me obvious that if you are starting out figuring out strategies for how to get your point of view across, even the simplest analysis shows bombing a dealership really doesn't get you anywhere—doesn't lead you down the road you want to go, it certainly doesn't win the hearts and minds of people to your cause, which is ultimately what you are trying to do.

I don't know why Derrick Jensen would be advocating that, although he shares the feeling we all have that there is a system out of control that is doing terrible damage to the earth. I'm not prepared to offer the solution to this—the proper strategy—because I don't see how, in any configuration, how environmentalists would gather sufficient power to overturn the capitalist system, whose engines are destroying the earth. I don't see any possible way of gathering sufficient power to overturn capitalism.

This is why, actually, that I got into secession, which is a movement that says: here's the problem, but the only conceivable solution would be to break larger states up. At a smaller scale, even if we're still operating on a capitalist system,

it's possible to have more democratic control over it. Ultimately, you could still operate with a capitalist system, but within a communal sensibility in which the machines of capitalism would be stopped or gentled. It seems doable in a way because you are not confronting capitalism head on, you are simply trying to absent yourself from the major powers of capitalism, and you are trying to deal with it on a smaller scale and [in] a more democratic system. And then ultimately you would hope that that would evolve into a system that would not be destroying the Earth.

AV: But it would emerge organically as part of a natural set of transitions or transformation of locally adaptive communities rather than some grand scheme. I'm thinking back to the SDS and the Weatherman phenomena: those were motivated, and the New Left more generally was motivated by the grand narrative—a kind of secular millennialist narrative—that imagined all of society would be transformed in a kind of magical way, and suddenly. That's there, actually, in at least some of the Weatherman writings. The expectations of a new dawn, a new era, but emerging as a kind of revolution, as an overthrow of the system, and I think what you're discussing is of a very different character than that. That's why I asked originally about the New Left and about SDS and whether you still see that as the starting point, or the taking-off point. Because it seems to me that what you're proposing in terms of secession—and what you discuss in books like *After Eden*, for example—it's not imposing on society a program or a millennialist vision in quite the same way as Marxist movements have attempted to do. Would you agree with that?

KS: What I'm arguing is quite different from overthrowing the system. I suppose that was in the hearts of many of the SDSers—it certainly was there in the Weather people—but it would seem to be a useless road to try and travel nowadays, to try to overthrow the system. Certainly there is no way that we know of at the moment for that to be done, and it's not going to be done by electoral politics or reform or a third party. It's not going to be done by bombs and guns, and so let's aim a different direction—let's not talk about overthrow. In that sense, late SDS is not the place where you want to start, but there is in early SDS the idea of participatory democracy, which implies a small scale, and could only be done at a fairly small scale.

I would think that Vermont would be really the largest scale at which you could try to work towards participatory democracy, and you would do it by working through the town meeting. But I think the original sense of SDS, participatory democracy and having control over your own life, are quite

consistent with the idea of secession that I am trying to push nowadays. Because those ideals would stand behind the kind of small independent state that would be formed by breaking away from the large imperial state we now have. And you don't have to worry yourselves particularly about trying to do away with capitalism overnight—you don't have to worry about that. What you try to do is have control over the instruments and institutions that affect your life. A very traditional SDS idea.

AV: That offers a different link between SDS and what you are talking about, writing about, and working on now: secession.

KS: Yes, I hadn't made that connection before, you are drawing me into it, but I think it's real. And that same New Left sensibility could operate to promote secession. Instead of overthrowing the empire, which does not seem to be doable, you absent yourself from the empire as much as you can. And indeed that sense of absencing oneself is a theme that runs through much of twentieth-century antisystem writing. I think of Lewis Mumford, for example, whose conclusions ultimately were that one should absent oneself as an individual to try and live outside of the system, but also he talked about doing that with one's community. And so ultimately you extend that and you can think of an independent state or region.

AV: Jefferson thought that the township was really the pillar or the core of the Republic, and I think there is a good case to be made for that.

KS: Then, too, you could argue that the large nation-state has proven itself to be a failure, and that the trend of the last half century has been toward smaller states and the dissolution of empires. Certainly since World War II this has been true, until now we have two empires left on the earth, one American and one Chinese, but I don't think either of those is sustainable, and I think that they too will fall to this trend of the devolution of power toward a smaller scale.

AV: The shift or the inevitable decline of oil production would play a role, I would think, in the decline of the imperial systems you are talking about, or of the grand centralized powers. That's what Jim Kunstler argues in *The Long Emergency*, and I think pretty convincingly.

KS: When peak oil hits us and we're not able to maintain the long imperial stretches that we now have, then everything will inevitably have to be operated

at a smaller scale. The imperial overreach just can't be maintained. It will be some time before that disintegration takes place, I think, but we're certainly hastening it in many ways. So it could well be a combination of peak oil, global warming, the reemergence of diseases (such as we're now seeing), a great rise in the oceans of the world. A combination of all of these things that seem to be heading in the same direction will cause the ultimate dissolution of these empires. And in the wake of them, if the disaster is not too great, the rebuilding would have to be done on a smaller scale with smaller independent states, which is why I think the idea of secession works. It's of this period, it's in tune with the way the world has gone for the past half century and in tune with the way the world seems to be going with the various largely environmental crises that this system is producing. And then the only viable future that you can envision is one where we are living in a smaller communal kind of arrangement. So that's why it seems to me to be worthwhile to try to push the idea of secession and sell it to your community, on the basis that not only is it positive in that you have control over your lives, but also in that you will be able to escape the kinds of crises that these imperial systems are foisting upon us.

AV: So you work with these different secession movements, and today there are how many groups in the U.S., was it 50?

KS: My latest registry lists 31 active groups. There are perhaps another 30 groups that are websites, let's say, or individuals, who are talking about this. And worldwide, I would guess there are probably close to 60 or 70 such groups that are active, but I've been able to locate only around 30 of them in North America that are serious and that are active. They all are moved by basic anti-imperialism, even the groups in the South, where you would expect to find greater nationalism. They would say they are still patriotic, but they are against the empire. They regard America as an empire, and they are against it and what it is doing, and what it is doing, not merely around the world, but also to life in America. So they start with the anti-imperialist idea, but they do not end up with quite the same idea of an environmentally sound society. Environmentalism is not an operating engine for many of these groups, although it should be. It works logically with secession that the only way you are going to be able to have some control over the agencies that commit environmental disasters is on a smaller scale—on a secessionist scale—but that idea has not yet been a major factor in any of the secessionist movements that I can think of. Not even Vermont, where the idea of saving Vermont from the forces of modernity is operating in the secessionist movement, but not much in an environmentalist way. Yes, perhaps in Vermont, but it's not part of the agenda for, let's say, Alaska.

It may be in some degree true for Hawaii, but ecological motivation is not part of the Puerto Rican movement, nor is it significant for people in Texas.

AV: League of the South?

KS: Not part of their operation.

AV: There is an organic quality to the development of smaller organizations, so perhaps you're right: it may be inescapable that they have to take into account ecological considerations, or the way the food is produced, agriculture, and so forth. So even if a group isn't interested in that—and in Alaska there's some antienvironmentalist sentiment in the population—still in the end, they're probably going to move to the same general kind of worldview.

KS: I would say it's inevitable that, if you are moving towards secession, you are moving toward control over your own lives, and that includes means of environmental protection and restoration. And of course, as the environmental disasters increase, it becomes more and more obvious that the only way to try and escape them is to cut yourself off from the imperial system that is creating them.

AV: So homesteading, for example, that kind of movement is implicitly a part of what you envision. Implicit in homesteading, for example, or that kind of perspective, is growing your own food, making sure that you're not getting milk from the megadairy, and so forth. So there is a kind of intrinsic perspective that is ecological, it's just not ideologically ecological. It can be practically ecological, without necessarily identifying itself as an ideological construct.

KS: People inevitably will have to deal with the environment, will have to reconstruct an economy on a different scale, and will be able to see how that economy is affecting the environment. It is the small nations of the world, at least of the developed world, that have the best environmental policies. Iceland, Norway, places that are small in number with control over their policies, these are the places with the best environmental record. I was thinking, along with homesteading, about home schooling, which is another very popular idea among secessionists because you are not a part of the system, the government-run schools, you are not a part of that. That principle is what we would operate on for all elements of your life in a secessionist state.

AV: I can see how, in some respects at least, what you're doing now in relation to the secessionist movement is a natural development and maybe a practicable application of what you have written about in your books. In particular, we might discuss *After Eden* and its relationship to what you are doing with the secessionist movement. Is it true that the different books that you have written are aspects of a larger narrative, or explorations of the same general territory? Perhaps the practical application of all these different areas you've explored in books like *Dwellers in the Land*, or *After Eden*, is the secessionist movement. Would that be a fair assessment or not? Or is that too simplistic?

KS: Secession is a means to an end that I have been discussing in all these books. But what I essentially want is for a change in consciousness that would allow people to live on the earth and with one another in a careful and egalitarian way. I mean egalitarian in a sense of the human species equal to the other species. And with it the feeling that this can only be done, you can only understand the earth in the place where you are living. You can only understand it regionally, or bioregionally, and until you have that understanding of the earth and its species and your part in it, you aren't going to be able to end the environmental assaults on the earth. That consciousness is really the underpinning of any rightful living on the earth, and I've been talking about that at least since *Human Scale*. A deep-ecology perspective is what we have to get to in order to live in the right way with our fellow creatures.

AV: So what you're arguing for is a change in consciousness? *After Eden* seemed to me to be fundamentally, ultimately, underneath the anthropology and archaeology that inform it, about states of consciousness.

KS: Yes it is. I started out with that general question: how did we get to be who we are now, destroying the very earth that we depend upon for our existence? That's got to be one of the strangest matters of human history since we started out six million years ago. How come it is that we don't have the wisdom, we don't have the consciousness that we ought to have? I came to the conclusion that it all began with hunting, and with the idea of hunting, that we can have control over all other species and turn to our will whatever we wanted to. And you begin that with large mammalian species, then in order to keep on doing this, you develop that idea that you can do it in all aspects of your life, you can have control over your environment, and you don't have to be subject to whatever whims it has, or at least you can try to control it as much as possible. You begin with spears, and that becomes so effective that after some

50,000 years of using spears and the like, we got so very good at it that we started making many of our fellow species extinct. Then we got even better technology, and on and on until today, when we have developed supreme technology for destroying our habitat. The consciousness that can defend this is almost unfathomable to me, but that is in fact the consciousness with which our society operates, except for a very small number of people who think differently. In *After Eden*, I write about the consciousness of the people that came along before these hunting people, and these were the *homo erectus*. I call this “*erectus* consciousness” and try to talk about what it looks like, but it is earth-regarding, and it does not place the human in control of any aspect of the environment. Before we got into hunting, we lived as species with other species on a roughly egalitarian level.

AV: That’s *homo erectus*?

KS: That’s *homo erectus*. Then I identify other small tribal societies, of today or of recent decades, that live in that same sort of way as the *erectus*, that are egalitarian and earth loving. Then I identify some groups, mostly in North America, that are working toward this same type of *erectus* consciousness. That includes bioregionalists, deep ecologists, and the burgeoning primitivist movement—the antimodern movement, which seems to me very positive signs that this type of consciousness can be developed even now within the system that we have grown up in. And indeed I would argue ultimately that the only thing that will save us is if we get to that type of consciousness.

AV: Have you given any thought to the role of religion in relation to that? Buddhism comes to mind, for example, with its emphasis on transmuting or awakening consciousness. Even though it’s not in *After Eden* in any explicit way, there is potentially (at least) a role for religion to play or a religious dimension to the kind of change in consciousness that you are talking about.

KS: Well I would say rather that there is a spiritual dimension to this. For my own part, I regard the earth in a spiritual way, as Gaia—the earth is a living, conscious entity. I think it’s useful to get to this *erectus* consciousness in a spiritual way. To come to have some kind of love for the earth in a spiritual sense, I think that is important. Religion, however, suggests a system, if not an institution, that I find very suspicious. In this work I have been doing for *After Eden*, I don’t find any sense of religion until quite late, after humans became hunters. When times were tough, and the climate was hard, they developed religion of a kind. The way we know that is that we find burials, intentional

burials, with grave goods alongside the bodies for the first time roughly 27,000 years ago. And the cave paintings of around that same time suggest a kind of ritual magic being practiced, which you can take as part of a religious attitude as well. But this I regard as a kind of desperate attempt to keep our control over the world. At the same time that we have religion, we have hierarchy, and that is evident in a number of ways, often from the kind of grave goods that are associated with bodies. This again is a wrongheaded way to go, which we developed in order to maintain our idea of having control over all the elements of the earth. So I would regard religion and hierarchy as starting down the wrong path. I see them as systems to defend humans in their wrong relationship to fellow creatures and to the earth. And organized religions have been among the worst in teaching people how to live properly as fellow creatures: the organized religions telling humans that they are the best, that their job is to subdue and to dominate. Actually systems of domination themselves, they also teach us how we can dominate the earth and other creatures.

AV: But there are distinctions to be made. The kind of language that you are using really comes out of Jewish and Christian monotheism, also to some extent probably monotheisms more generally. But there are indigenous religious traditions. I'm not sure that all religion can be characterized in the same way. Just to take the example of indigenous religious traditions, it seems to me that shamanic traditions aren't necessarily the same as monotheistic ones. There is potentially a level of domination there, or language of control of spirits, for example, and sorcery, but that is only one aspect of many.

KS: I find the shaman emerging at the same time that cave hunting magic and religion is emerging and hierarchy is emerging. The shaman is that figure set aside from the rest to be the superior intervener in the world, so that humans can go on with their domination. By definition, once you start getting a priestly caste, you are creating hierarchy, and you are creating institutions to protect human dominance. Although I would agree with you that, certainly in some Native American traditions, there is a regard for the earth that is far superior to anything in the organized religions that I'm talking about. The Iroquois for example have a tradition or regard for the earth that is quite sophisticated, very close to *erectus* consciousness, but they can do that without having a hierarchical religion or indeed a hierarchical polity.

AV: Isn't primitivism, and the kind of position that you're espousing toward the end of *After Eden*, isn't it a bit dangerous? Doesn't it in principle reject all of the enlightenment? The kind of primitivism that John Zerzan represents critiques

even language itself. And it reminded me of Mark Rudd back in the SDS. You quoted him in your book: he had been asked by someone what is good about the university, and he was dumbstruck. He had no idea how to respond concerning what was good about the university. He had never thought about that. It struck me as such an interesting anecdote about SDS, but then I started to consider it in relation to primitivism, and it occurred to me: federalism, or freedom of religion, or civil liberties, or liberal education itself, these are worthy inventions. Isn't there a danger within the primitivist movement, for example, of an anti-enlightenment thinking that throws out things that really are admirable and worth preserving?

KS: I don't go as far as Zerzan goes with his rejection of things civilized—language, sense of time. But I don't know if the Enlightenment is what has brought us things that are necessary for our subsistence. It seems to me the Enlightenment represents the culmination of human domination, particularly insofar as it's built on science. Science, as Bacon said, is the means of making nature do our bidding. And that's part and parcel of the idea of the Enlightenment that humans are primary, that with their minds they always know how to control the elements of the earth. These are very dangerous ideas, as far as I am concerned. You might argue that liberal education is a good thing, but I would argue that it is merely a means by which the culture teaches its compliant citizens to do the bidding of the system. Ultimately that's what it does, and that's what it's supposed to do. That's why universities were created, ultimately, to sustain a culture that teaches us [that] hierarchy, control, and domination are the proper ways that we relate to the world.

AV: The one possible exception to that might be the humanities, at least as they were once conceived—the humanities tradition of critique and reflection.

KS: Humanities. The very word is derived from the primacy of the human. Humanism was the doctrine, developed in the fourteenth century, that taught there was a hierarchy of things that goes from God to angels to humans and that everything else—usually including women—was inferior to that. The human was the closest thing to God and superior to all other creatures on earth. Very dangerous ideas, as far as I am concerned, the ideas that have led us to this powerful domination that we now know is destroying much of the world, and looks as if it is headed full-bore to destroying its own culture, its own system.

AV: You predict catastrophe, in other words, unless the kind of profound change that you are talking about, in for example *After Eden*, but also implied in the secession movement—unless some of those changes come to pass, and an organically developed alternative society or societies begin to emerge.

KS: You know, I have made a bet with a guy from *Wired* magazine whether everything will collapse by 2020, and I believe that it will. I believe there will be a confluence of disasters, during which the dollar becomes totally worthless, and the entire global system built upon the dollar collapses, and a super-depression, unlike anything we have seen, combines with environmental disasters, of which global warming is only one, along with civil unrest on a huge scale across all developed societies, with the poverty-stricken part of the world rising up against the developed part of the world. I believe all of these will combine within the next 15 years, let's say, to bring down Western civilization. With the *Wired* fellow, I made a \$1,000 bet, a \$10,000 bet, that this would happen, and I became a confirmed "collapsist," as I am now. And the time scale I might not have right, but I can see that this will happen within the foreseeable future.

It seems to me that's the way things are going. I am confident that all empires collapse, all empires that we know of have collapsed, and they have all collapsed in roughly the same way: by their economic systems eroding within themselves, environmental disasters, and civil unrest, with the bottom of society no longer putting up with its position of injury, depression, and poverty. So I am convinced that the American empire will collapse, just the way these other empires have, and China, which is dependent on the dollar, will collapse when the dollar collapses. Indeed, what's astonishing is how the capitalist system has managed to continue and how the American system has managed to continue with incredible deficits, with China and Japan owning most of our treasury. How this lasts for even a month astonishes me, but I am convinced it won't last beyond a decade or so, and [then] we are going to have a world of chaos and confusion. Out of this chaos, if anything survives, it will be small, independent, communitarian, ecological nations and regions.

AV: I think that is an excellent place to conclude. Thank you very much for the conversation.

KS: My pleasure.