

# Bruce Parry Interview on Renegade Ink

Ross Ashcroft & Bruce Parry

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We're at Port Eliot Festival in Cornwall this week in search of new ideas, great speakers and, of course, those people who are thinking differently...

Bruce Parry is an indigenous rights advocate, author, explorer and filmmaker. He has lived with some of the most isolated tribes in the world, learning from how they interact with each other and the planet.

Host Ross Ashcroft caught up with him to hear his ideas on how to we can rethink our leadership structures and muster the courage to look within, so that we are able to change the modern Western narrative.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15AzX1Uc\\_7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15AzX1Uc_7s)

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## Introduction

**Ross:** After much exploration, one of the things that has truly inspired Bruce is the idea of egalitarian living.

He doesn't want to turn back the clock, but he does want us to rethink our leadership structures and muster the courage to look within so we're able to fundamentally change the modern Western narrative.

## Conversation Begins

**Ross:** If you see a lot of our structures in the so-called developed world, you see very steep alienating hierarchies, banking, government, politics, all the rest of it.

Often what you see within those hierarchies is an incredibly low trust environment.

People are, it's dog-eat-dog, there's Machiavelli behaviour, people are insecure, they're often overachievers and insecure, which makes them more competitive, and it's not a healthy or propitious environment to base a society on.

When you've worked with or lived with tribes that have flatter hierarchies.

What is the difference between the developed world with those steep hierarchies and those flatter structures?

**Bruce:** Well, I think that the groups that I've lived with who truly are egalitarian and they work endlessly and tirelessly to maintain balance and are stopping anyone getting above and anyone getting beneath each other, they're all working with the various tools.

They have a big toolkit of ways to do that.

Something emerges that they understand the reason they're doing that is that when power does get out of hand, and it does start rising up, and people do start

accumulating more, showing off more, or getting more status for whatever reason, that actually that has a massive ripple effect in a negative way amongst the rest of the people.

There's a lot more stress, there's a lot more anxiety, and that has an impact in all aspects of health and well-being and society as a whole and so the groups that I've lived with who truly are egalitarian, and there's very few left, But it's widely believed that actually it is our way of being before the dawn of agriculture and so for the majority of our time on the planet, we were living in a much more egalitarian way than since the dawn of agriculture.

That these groups who still have these traits left, very few who have been left, give us an insight into that way of being and they're more stress-free.

Actually, some of them are some of the most peaceful people on the planet.

Without leaders and shamans or the hierarchy at all, we think that these people would be like tearing each other's eyes out.

But actually, they're very peaceful.

But the other thing is that they understand it's about, rather than giving the power away, it's about re-empowering the individual.

It's about self-empowerment and everyone has the responsibility and the right to be able to work individually.

It's not like a central politburo organization that you're giving it to share it out.

It's actually everyone individually is holding that and so everyone is working in that space.

So the difference is that there's a lot less stress.

Everyone is not, it's not this dog-eat-dog, because we're actually all in it together, and we're sharing, we're helping each other out, and there's a sense of unity and all of those things.

I mean, it is actually a paradigm shift.

It's a totally different way of looking at the world.

**Ross:** And when you can trust that, having lived with these tribes and indigenous people, and then you come back to the so-called developed world, I mean, that must be a...

Phenomenal shift.

**Bruce:** I mean, obviously, when I was making my tribe series for the BBC, I went to lots of places.

So I got quite used to going out and having an experience in a very different place and then coming home.

So that sort of lifestyle of shifting from one type of society to another was quite normal for me, and I kind of got my head around it.

But when I finally lived with a truly egalitarian group, I then realized that I was into something else.

So it was completely, it was almost like every other tribe that I'd lived with, and every other nation that I've ever visited, every other person I've visited, were living in a certain way, and this group were living in a completely different way.

So it wasn't even just about me coming back, it was about me re-evaluating human nature and society itself.

Like the whole thing of being with this group was like, wow, this is so different to everything else I've experienced before.

It was quite hard to put my finger on it first, because it's invisible, like people are living without competition.

It's like, They didn't seem that different, but I could feel that there was something totally different going on and so it was a very slow transition for me to really figure that out.

But I now, having had the benefit of speaking to a number of anthropologists and realizing that this is actually well acknowledged now, I have the courage to talk about it, it's like, this is how it is now for some people on the planet, and quite possibly how it was for us all for 90% of our time and so that's a big thing.

**Ross:** And where was that?

**Bruce:** So the group that I met first was actually the last tribe that I ever lived with called the Penan people, and they live in Borneo, in Sarawak, in Malay, Borneo and then there were a number of others in Southeast Asia, including one group who see any form of violence as a type of mental illness.

They've worked together so much that they've actually almost eradicated any sort of overt form of violence in their society, which is phenomenal and then there's also groups in Africa as well, mostly in the Congo.

There's still like 100,000 people living in this way.

Because another thing people say to me is like, Bruce, there's like, there's an egalitarian tribe, sure, but they must be in competition with the tribe across the way.

But actually, if you go to somewhere like the Congo, you realize that because these are nomadic hunter-gatherers, that this is such an ever-changing amorphous BLOB that actually spreads out into, today even still, 100,000 people in that forest.

So it's not just a way of existing that can only exist in a small group.

It's actually a way that these people have found that can be in a huge, vast expanse of people too.

That was something that was interesting for me.

**Ross:** What are the things that can be taken from those tribes that can be used alongside a lot of the progress that we've had over the years today that could be helpful to where we're sat now?

**Bruce:** Well, for me, it's the narrative.

You know, I think we are in a sort of like a war of narratives going on at the moment.

**Ross:** And what is that conflict?

**Bruce:** I think that we're, every philosopher that's ever lived, and religious leaders from Lao Tzu, Jesus, Confucius, you know, like through to Plato and Aristotle, and everyone has had their best attempt at trying to figure out how we can all live together.

But the interesting thing about all those people is that although they all had their best idea and their best story that they were trying to offer, and much of that has brought great blessings, of course, but none of them knew about egalitarian tribes living in the deep forest.

None of them, they'd all had like 800 years of civilization and conditions before they came up with their best answers.

So they were already looking at the world through a certain paradigm and none of them even knew about this.

So I think we're in a really interesting time at the moment where actually we're able to connect with these last vestiges of people who are still offering us an insight into the time before agriculture and go, wow, there's something about them.

Knowing that it was...

how we lived and how we lived successfully.

the sort of narrative we have at the moment, it's like, left to our own devices, we'll tear each other's hearts out and it's like, no, these are, some of these are the most peaceful people on the planet.

**Ross:** That has been a narrative that's been sold to us.

So if you're talking about the narrative wars, if you like.

Lord of the Flies.

**Bruce:** Yeah, Piggy.

Of course, because that's the prison by which we're looking at the world and also when we look inside ourselves, we often see quite a lot of darkness and we project that and we project it and also we're fearful of going on the journey of healing and to sort of like undo it because we think, well, going in there to look at all that is actually, it just leads to misery and darkness, like why would you? But the other experience that I had with living with these people is that they're very placid and not all, but the particular ones that I live with is like super placid, super pacifistic and peaceful and like where's the axis of evil there? Where's the bad people that are just genetically bad that we need to incarcerate and throw away the key.

It's like they're not just there.

So it invites you to reevaluate all of society, all of human nature when you have the privilege of living with people like that.

It's like, wow, that's totally different and I have to rethink everything and also we live in this extraordinary age where we can promulgate that information.

You know, so much of what we're talking about is about power and hierarchy and obviously, traditionally speaking, power likes to hold on to power, and that's been the way for quite a long time.

But we're now in this super interesting time of peer-to-peer communications of different memes and ideas that can be spread, and then also different apps and things that talk about decentralization.

So yeah, it's not perfect, because a lot of those people are creating this.

becoming the most powerful people on the planet, but arguably the most powerful. Arguably so.

but I think that this particular narrative, when you understand it, does make sense for everyone and like whether you're rich or poor, whether you're in poor or bad health, it's like everyone...

When you really get it, we're coming together in this way, the experience of being with those people, and it does make sense deep inside us, I believe, is that actually we're all better off.

We're fed a story that like more is better.

You know, you look at the adverts, you look at the soap operas, it's sort of spilling this idea out and you know, for those who've had the privilege of like having lots of certain things, whether it's money, I've realized that money is often...

led to alienation.

I don't need to engage with people in the same way.

Because you're above it all.

In a sense, yeah.

I mean, like...

**Ross:** But you don't think that, but actually this thing has come in and it's meant that you're on a different branch socioeconomically.

**Bruce:** I know, and people treat you differently with fame as well.

They treat you differently and all of that sort of stuff.

It's like, you know, you shift and ends up often becoming more isolated and a little bit lonely and the bigger house you have and the more stuff you have, the stuff owns you and all of those things.

**Bruce:** Their tactility is so touching. It's really... There's no cynicism. There's no cheap wit or anything.

It's so different to me in my life where it's all chippiness and you can be a little bit above the other with the comments and quotes and stuff and here it's just solid, one loving group.

And I know that sounds overly romantic, and of course, they have their problems. But as a visitor, coming here, you're just enveloped in these big, loving arms and made to feel welcome instantly.

**Bruce:** It's becoming increasingly understood now that actually at the heart of so many of our addictions, there's two things.

One is like pain from a trauma, and another one is like a hole or a gap from separation, that we're trying to fill that void.

**Ross:** But it's insatiable.

**Bruce:** It's insatiable.

**Ross:** We've said on this program many times, you know, there's often a finger pointing out and three pointing back, but we don't ever look at the three pointing back, right, because it's ugly.

How do you begin that conversation? Specifically, from your experience, Coming back to the UK, the developed world, however you want to describe it, how do you begin that conversation?

**Bruce:** Well, I think for me, a number of things.

It's like, firstly, knowing that these people live in a certain way where all of their needs on a deep level are met, and that they're nourished and actually laughter's just beneath the surface, and that they have all of this stuff and I would say, and I'm not a romantic, because I've seen a lot of...

not great things on my travels, with indigenous peoples, too.

But there are certain groups who have certain ways of being where I think, well, that's exemplary and so knowing that we can live with our needs met without the need for rampant consumption, knowing that that's possible is one thing.

Knowing that, or believing that, those three fingers pointing back are...

part of us and our problem and that actually it's worth the journey to go on trying to deal with that is the next big thing to understand.

It's like, I know many people are like, oh, I'm not going to slow down and stop and look inside because it's just dark in there.

It's just demons and I'm just not going to go there and that's what I feel when I start to look.

So I'm not going to do it and that, of course, as you said, leads to the rampant consumption and what have you.

But like, so to believe that beneath those layers of conditioning, something really beautiful is, I think, a huge story that has to come back.

It's like, and knowing, in my instance, having lived with groups of people who don't exhibit those traits, like, where is that in those people? They're not exhibiting it because perhaps...

They don't have all the problems that we do and so if we can get to that place, we could also live in a harmonious way like them.

So I think, again, with these narratives, it's like knowing that and believing that is another big step for us to go into.

**Ross:** We talk about flatter hierarchies, indigenous people, harmonious living, and all the rest of it.

If we look at where we're at today, I mean, the scourge, well, there are many, right? But the big scourge is inequality.

From your travels, how do you begin to address that? How do you begin to level out and think about leadership when it comes to inequality and trying to close the gap between those who have so very much and those who are living hand-to-mouth?

**Bruce:** We spoke earlier about narratives and how important that is.

So to believe it and know it firstly, and then if you believe it and know that the society is better without that disparity of wealth in the same way, I mean, which is a no-brainer, but somehow we're still on that same conveyor belt going towards this old narrative.

But if you can believe that a different way is better, then you can start, your ears can prick up when you start hearing things that talk about decentralization, that talk about challenging the existing orthodoxy.

and there's plenty that's out there that's trying to do that, and they're not perfect by any means, right? And there's lots of easy ways to, like, have pot shots at them and dismiss pretty much, but...

Still, for me, it's like when someone's talking about decentralization, when someone's talking about like diffusing in some way the power base, then my ears prick up.

So even things like Bitcoin and blockchain, even things like some of the stuff that's coming out of Silicon Valley, appear to be a communication and disseminating, whether it's hotels or taxis or whatever, all of these things that I think that they have something that's trying to diffuse power a little bit and we said earlier, you know, there's still a few individuals who get incredibly rich from that, but for the rest of the society, there's more of a peer to be.

aspect and direct democracy, I mean, that's another huge one.

I mean, why on earth aren't we talking more about that? I mean, we use phones and apps for our banking and everything, but we could use it for voting.

We could use it for voting for every single thing we wanted.

We could, like, diffuse Parliament completely.

It's like you and I could go up for being members of Parliament and say, we will get in and we won't do anything that you don't tell us to do.

Like, we're just invisible.

It's nothing to do with me.

**Ross:** Turns out the incumbents don't want that.

**Bruce:** It's interesting, isn't it? And of course, again, like I say, there's nuance in this, and there's clearly people are like, Well, you know, look at Brexit, look at the ridiculous decisions we made when we give the power back to the people.

That's because we're so disempowered that we're just like leaves in the wind when it comes to all this information.

But actually, give people power, we all know that in our lives as being, whether we're in business or whatever.

When you give someone responsibility, they step up and it's, I believe in us as people.

I believe, look at the, look at the, the legal system, We're happy to trust people to come in and be a jury, and that people straight off the street randomly pick from the street and look at the job they do, they step up and they're wise and they make decisions, and we as a society are willing to accept those decisions.

We are, once we're given power back, able to step into that and I fully believe that and sometimes you wonder when, maybe this is a bit crazy.

It could go either way.

But I just have to believe that from the experiences I've had around the world.

**Ross:** Let's come to the economics.

So what you're saying is to be able to solve the leadership problems that we have, to be able to solve the inequality and all the rest of it, you've got to turn the ship.

Do you think, and I don't mean this in a disaster capitalism kind of way, do you think that people are way too comfortable, certainly in the UK, and it's going to take the next crisis, in a sense, for the movement that you support.

Those movements, those people, and those thinkers should seize the next crisis to say, actually, I know you thought that was wonderful, but getting rid of those luxuries is going to put you on a different path, and that path is a happier one.

**Bruce:** Yeah, I definitely think the latter.

I think that new path is the better one for us to be on, and it will be better for us all.

So I think that deep down, we're all going to benefit from this new direction.

**Ross:** How do you sell it?

**Bruce:** I think that you're right in highlighting that it seems to be, historically speaking, that most of these shifts don't happen without some sort of crisis and you look at Greece, you look at Spain, a lot of those alternative mindsets rose to the fore as a result of them going through the difficulties in those times and I think, we are, as you mentioned, the UK is a privileged society taking a lot of material wealth from around the world and has done for a long time and we're sitting very pretty, doing fine, thank you very much.

It's going to take a lot for us to wake up.

But we have woken up in the past, and we're the first to look at abolition and the slavery and so, we are great people and we could also be part of this shift, but we are also incredibly comfortable.

I don't know what the next crisis is going to be that's going to make us wake up, but I would much rather and will try to work on turning the ship around before we hit the iceberg.

Because hitting the iceberg when we haven't put these bits of information into the society could cause all sorts of really quite nasty upsets and so I would much rather we were able to get through this thing together rather than have some sort of collapse that ends up separating us and the resentment, the anger, and all the rest of it that could rise up.

There is already collateral damage happening in the world.

The direction we're going is causing more and more and more, often over the hill to others that we don't recognize, but we are causing all sorts of negative waves with the way we're living our lives, and I've seen that firsthand.

So in some ways I'm up for us having a bit of a slap and I'm up for us having to be forced to reevaluate.

I would like that to happen in a managed way somehow where, as I said earlier, the sort of pain and anger doesn't rise to the surface.

But yeah, I do think we've got to change.

**Ross:** Post-slap, what does the Paris world look like? I'm going to make you emperor of the world for a day.

You've got to set out your manifesto.

What does it look like, though, having looked at tribes, indigenous people, and the rest of it? What are the sort of tenets of putting a society together that really thrives?

**Bruce:** Well, I think that being closer to our resources is actually a beautiful thing too.

You know, I think that I'm looking to try and live more locally.

I think that we've got all these fierce stories about the amount of harvests less because of the soils and stuff, but actually there's lots of evidence to suggest that actually living more locally to your production is manageable and possible.

I think there's also a lot that comes from living more together, but I'm aware that I'm now talking about things like agriculture.

and lots of people like, I don't want to go down that path.

I want to stay in the city.

So how that's going to work for us all, I have no idea.

I think that we have to radically reevaluate how we're getting our resources from around the world.

I think we have to do that locally.

I think that we have to radically reevaluate our decision-making processes as a mass.

I'm A believer in, as you know, is decentralized power and so re-empowering the individual and having us all much more involved in things, especially locally, but also nationally, that's going on.

I've been really inspired as well in some of the tribes that I've been with, the role of women coming together and holding space and offering a very different way of helping with the decision-making and stopping things getting out of hand and just offering a slightly different quality and I know that's a complex one to talk about in today's age, but I do think that we are in a, you know, in a bit of a patriarchy and have been for a long time and that shift would be very beneficial for all of us, so to have a much stronger female voice in the real decisions of society and economics, you know, there's so many other economic systems out there.

**Ross:** Hang on, no.

Under neoliberalism, there is no alternative.

We've just got to keep bashing down this route.

Yeah, I mean, it's madness.

I mean, lunacy.

**Bruce:** It's madness.

It is madness and in many ways, of course, even behind the politics and all the rest of it, the economics, as you know, from the films you've made and the people you've met, like, that is just sort of beating heart of how everything is moving on and so, there are extraordinary other ways that we could do our economics that would like disseminate power rapidly and would like demurrative currencies and all sorts of things that would...

reduce power and could even do it in a relatively gentle way if we went about it or wanting to do it rather than like tearing down the walls.

I think that it's in the interest of those empowered to see what's coming and maybe like start doing that a little bit.

But either way, the economic system has to be, I think, completely overhauled.

So yeah, what does my world look like? Well, actually, it's a decentralized, fully empowered individuals being happy in community, going through healing processes to that hold each other and support each other as we learn what it's like to be again in nature and with each other and for those in urban spaces who are very much involved in jobs that they enjoy doing other things, I think it's like re-evaluating, what is it that I'm doing? Am I of service to the future generations? Am I of service to nature, which we need to support us? We can't just be exporting our detritus over the hill.

**Ross:** Or am I serving myself? And that's a really fundamental question, isn't it? Am I serving something bigger on myself.

**Bruce:** 100%, and we know that from who is it, Victor Frankl? Yeah, Victor Frankl, of course, yeah, the man's request for meaning.

I mean, he made that point super clearly.

**Ross:** And he also said happiness in that, but he said, Don't dedicate yourself to yourself and don't pursue happiness.

Yeah, absolutely.

Because it can't be pursued.

**Bruce:** Yeah, totally.

**Ross:** It has to ensue.

**Bruce:** Yeah, it has to ensue and he saw in Auschwitz, which is, let's face it, a pretty tough place, anyone whose meaning in life was their own well-being clearly struggled, because there's nowhere that's been that's more horrific than that and I don't want to say that lightly.

I mean, imagine.

Those who found their meaning in something beyond themselves and were making incremental steps to that could put up with all sorts of deprivations, provided that they were finding their meaning beyond themselves and still get through, even in difficult times, find happiness and the film I just made, Tawai, there's a line at the end from the indigenous peoples.

They say, look, I don't know about planes or cars, but if it doesn't last forever, I don't want it.

Unlike the forest, which lasts till the end of time.

**Indigenous Penan man:** We should have knowledge about everything we have, here, and in the city. People say it's good to travel by plane or by car, but as I see it, if it's not something I can guarantee for future generations, if it's not something that lasts forever, I do not want it.

It's not the same for the forest, that we can have until the end of time.

**Bruce:** It's not that they don't find planes and cars cool, of course they do, they love planes and cars, but they just find their meaning in something more.

Their meaning is the betterment of the children's lives going forwards, and that's where they get their happiness.

So they're happier with that than they are with the planes, the trinkets of our world.

Like the trinkets of our world, yes, but we are happier doing that, so they're not doing that as a sacrifice is genuinely where they find their happiness.

**Ross:** Turns out the baubles of capitalism don't suffice.

It doesn't work, but this lot would have you believe they would.

**Bruce:** In their instance, so this is a nomadic group living in the forest, they've seen what's happened to their relatives if they've settled, been said by the Malaysian government, like, come, settle here, we'll give you houses, we'll give you cars, we'll use schools, and all that stuff.

We'll just take your forest.

But you've got all the wonders of our modern life and of course, Often these indigenous peoples are projecting with as much romance into our world as we are to theirs and so they were like, yeah, you guys look like you're the happiest people on the planet.

Rush on in and then suddenly it's not working so well because it doesn't have longevity in it.

**Indigenous Penan woman:** When I was young we used to drink from the river. It was very clear, we don't dare drink it because many of us got sick. When I was young, the river was clear like this, we don't know what makes the water clear.

I don't want it to be logged for the second time. We still have enough food from the forest, but if they continue logging again that will be the end of our lives.

**Indigenous Penan man:** I will only be satisfied if the land is officially given to us, till death I have to defend this land. This is all I can tell you.

The reason why we are scared of these things is because they are very new to us. The company, the pipeline and the dams are the biggest problem that we face now. Besides these three things we have no problems.

**Bruce:** The forest, who clearly also Are looking out, wondering, and thinking about what our world is like, but they're seeing their relatives go through the shift, and that's why this last groups who are still in the forest are going, Wow, slow down.

Maybe it's not as great out there as we thought.

Maybe what we've got is actually...

serving our children better than what they are because they're all struggling to try and figure out and everyone's living in anxiety about what their children, how their children are going to survive and here we are and we know that because we have a deep connection with our resources that we use.

We have the knowledge and understanding of how to get them and we're happy as a group, you know, like it's a no-brainer there. That will last forever. Ours...

**Ross:** Not so much.

Bruce, thanks for all your work.

Thanks for the film Tawai and thanks for your time.

**Bruce:** Lovely to meet you.

## Outtake

**Bruce:** These ideas not being in the marketplace...

**Ross:** There's a mosquito and as a man who's been in every jungle in the world, I was going to swat it, but I thought, I can't, you know what you're doing.

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