

A Manual for Survival

Lewis Mumford's Quest for Balance in a Fragmented World

The Poor Prole's Almanac

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In this episode of the Poor Proles Almanac, Andy and Matt explore the intellectual life and enduring legacy of Lewis Mumford, a scholar and activist whose work serves as a vital manual for modern civic, social, and ecological thought.

Though he is often pigeonholed as an urban planner, the hosts reveal Mumford as a radical generalist who sought to heal the fractures between science, art, and ecology.

Originally trained as an engineer, Mumford's worldview was transformed by the work of Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes, leading him to abandon sheer technical ability in favor of the "fullness of man's existence." This shift birthed his vision of a "biotechnic order"—a civilization where technology is no longer an end in itself but is instead oriented toward the culture of life and the self-actualization of the human personality.

The discussion dives deep into Mumford's critique of the "mega machine," his term for the pervasive ideology of power and bureaucracy that prioritizes quantitative production over living needs.

Drawing on the anarchist philosophy of Peter Kropotkin, Mumford advocated for decentralization and the "Garden City" ideal—limited-size towns harmoniously integrated with nature.

The hosts contrast Mumford's human-centered ethics with the rigid energy-efficiency models of the Odum brothers, arguing that an ethical society must self-regulate within its ecological limits rather than succumbing to the cold logic of "big survey" or eco-fascism.

By tracing Mumford's influence on figures like Murray Bookchin and Wendell Berry, the episode highlights how these mid-century ideas provide a necessary framework for resisting the centralized "pentagon of power" in our modern era of AI and industrial extraction.

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Andy: Welcome back everyone.

It's Poor Pearl's Almanac time again.

I'm your host Andy and joined by the cheeky Matt.

Matt: What? Excuse me?

Andy: Why not? So this season we've been talking about all sorts of fun stuff about land resistance, community defense.

We talked about our buddy Henry Stephen Salt, how he basically was everyone's best friend that was important in the 19th century.

how he started tying this idea of socialism and the limitations of capitalism to ecology and the concept of a very primitive understanding of appropriate technologies.

We'll talk about his BFF Kropotkin later on today and despite this episode not being about him because unsurprisingly, the side of socialism that found itself connected to the land tended to be more along that libertarian anarchist lens, even if the terminology wasn't exclusively used.

Matt: It's weird that people who use the term fully automated luxury space communism didn't come from a line of thinking about land relations.

Andy: Right? That's so surprising.

So today we're going to trace the intellectual life of Lewis Mumford, a name you probably don't know for most of the people listening.

He was a scholar, he was an activist, and his work remains really a manual for a lot of civic, social, ecological thought around what those public spaces should look like and like I said, you probably never heard of him and even if you have, it's probably around his focus in urban planning and urban development, which might seem really out of place given everything we've been talking about this season, but I do promise it will make sense.

So we'll talk about like his interest in this concept of wholeness and balance and how this really provides him with a prescription for how to make civilization survive and it's really this idea of a shift from a mechanical age towards what he considered a biotechnic order.

Matt: Damn, the biotechnic order.

I mean, like my favorite part of doing this podcast is when a person that I've never heard of has basically shaped a lot of things that my ideology is formed on.

It's always good to get like, you know, a reminder every now and then that we just generally know nothing about ourselves.

Andy: The thing I know about myself is that I know nothing.

Yes, that's what we're here for and that's what they all say about this show.

So we're going to talk a bit about how this vision was deeply connected to his political philosophy, which is a belief in decentralized power and basically human control and this was a concept he rigorously tested within the framework that Kropotkin kind of laid out with a lot of his work.

Now, if you're not familiar with Kropotkin, we never did an episode on him.

I feel like there's enough people that have done it.

Go find someone that's talked about him.

There's a lot of great stuff.

Really interesting guy.

Matt: People know about it.

Andy: Yeah, people should know about it.

But if you don't, go do a little homework.

Now, what's interesting about this guy, our buddy Louis here, is that his career was really this constant effort to integrate seemingly disparate ideas and fields.

He liked to bring science and art together and ecology and economics, and believed that this fracture was the source of modern society's ills.

Matt: So like the Odom brothers, but good.

Andy: Exactly.

Nice throwback.

If you don't know who the Odom brothers are, go back about 50 episodes and tune into that one.

So if you don't have time to go tune into that, I guess.

The Odom brothers are basically these ecologists who decided that you could turn everything into a measurement of energy and if we were the most efficient with that energy, we could solve all the world's problems.

surprised they ended up being kind of fascists.

Matt: And it would all turn into paper clips.

Andy: Yeah.

They were basically like, well, if we get rid of all of this native ecosystem and we put in all soybeans, I mean, not actually that, but like that was the line of thinking that they ended up kind of going down is like, well, it doesn't matter because all that matters is the most efficient thing.

Matt: The like maximum solar aggregation.

Andy: Yeah.

Matt: Oh, I forget what the like permaculturists call it.

Andy: term they use is emergy, remember? Not energy, emergy.

We're not going to get into that, but you.

Matt: If the listeners can't see me, but I'm making a very rude gesture.

Andy: Yes, one of the interesting things though about the Odom brothers is we're actually going to talk a lot about them over the next couple episodes.

Not specifically, but I'm going to be doing this exact thing about the Odom brothers because there's a lot of overlap with what happens in the next 50 years with that line of thinking that fed into permaculture.

So if you weren't sold on Y, we had concerns about that movement as a whole.

We're going to tackle it over the next like 6 episodes from a very different perspective.

But there's like a constant theme that seems to be running that we're going to get into.

But to backtrack, Louie, Louie Louie.

Our boy, Louis Mumford.

Matt: Louie Louie.

Andy: Our local boy.

He was born in New York City in 1895.

Matt: Go Mets.

Andy: Yeah, go Mets.

Sure, why not? He had a, let's call it complicated childhood.

He had a single mom.

He never knew who his dad was.

They lived in the slums.

He claimed that the city was his primary teacher.

What he called his quote unquote open university and his, what he called, again, guiding metaphor for the multi-dimensional nature of life.

Now, his mom was kind of a disaster, and honestly, a biography of his childhood would have horrified most of our listeners, and I struggled through enough of 1 that we don't have time for that.

Now, he initially planned to be an electrical engineer, and he was very good about having a high level of integrity in his work, precision and mechanics, He was well designed and geared to be a mechanic or an engineer, but that ambition changed overnight.

Matt: So what happened, Andy? What caused this sort of the joint to pivot?

Andy: What happened to our boy?

Matt: Where did he go wrong?

Andy: He realized he valued, and again, this is his own words, the fullness of man's existence, end quote, over sheer technical ability.

So he was just, you know, smoking weed and just looked out the window and was like, fuck this.

Matt: Yeah, I bet this, you can tell that this guy never watched RoboCop.

Andy: Yeah, so this existential crisis that hit him came from the work of a Scottish biologist named Patrick Geddes.

Now, Mumford discovered Getty's work around 1914 and it basically recalibrated his entire existence.

Matt: That's awesome.

Andy: It's like that, again, being 19, 20 years old and just like, oh my God, why has no one told me this was something that existed, right?

Matt: Fukuoka's Sunrise Over the Bay.

Andy: Yeah.

Sunrise, that's another throwback right there.

So if you haven't listened or you're not familiar with Fukuoka, Matt did a delicious.

Matt: Only the real Masanobu heads will get that one.

Andy: Yeah.

You can listen to Matt read a beautiful poem that changed a man's life.

That's going way back.

But to the modern era.

So we talked a couple weeks ago, maybe a week ago, I don't remember.

We talked about Henry Stephen Salt, right? And how he seems to just know everybody that was writing about this stuff.

Getty's is like the exception to that rule.

However, they had tons of mutuals, including one of Henry Salt's really good friends, a guy named William Carpenter, who we talked about last week.

So I don't doubt that they knew each other, but they just didn't have any like formal connection.

Matt: Get these guys on LinkedIn, am I right?

Andy: He's got jokes. Fucking Brits.

Matt: And Andy doesn't like my networking jokes.

Andy: I don't.

Matt: Anyway, so he maybe sort of, maybe didn't, maybe did know Henry Salt, a sort of gorgeous defender and friend of all living things, except the Scots.

Andy: I mean.

Matt: It was all living things except the Scots.

Andy: As A Brit, you would probably be afraid of the Scots too.

I've heard stories about them, all right? Now, Geddes was considered a pioneer in human ecology, and he insisted on a methodology rooted in biology around how humans should live.

So he viewed cities as natural structures or organisms, which is like, I think today we metaphorically see that a lot in literature and stuff, but it was still like a fairly novel idea to take seriously at this time.

Like his buddies, like Henry Salt.

Lewis was heavily influenced by Kropotkin, someone who he eventually considered a close friend and who he shared ideas and letters with.

Again, so many overlaps that all these people were writing to each other, they knew each other, fun stuff, right? So Getty showed Mumford how to be a rigorous generalist and what that meant was he demonstrated how biological principles could be extended metaphorically to critique culture.

Mumford credited Geddes with saving him from just becoming another specialist.

Matt: that awful hellish fate of specialization.

Andy: Right? This concept of like holistic, which I think is kind of swung the pendulum the other way, and like a lot of this type of space of agriculture and yada yada yada, this influenced Mumford's first book, which was called *The Story of Utopias*, which came out in 1922.

He's not even 30 years old when this book came out.

He critiqued previous utopian visions as dull as mud.

Those are his words.

Matt: Cool.

Andy: Because they were divorced from the complexity of real landscape centered environments and his solution or what he concluded was that social renewal requires connecting the arts and sciences to particular communities and defined regions through the regional survey method that was developed by Gettys.

Matt: It just, his solution would just happen to be the regional survey method he invented.

Andy: Okay.

Matt: No, I know a ***** scam when I see one.

Andy: Sorry, man.

Sorry to break your heart on that one.

Matt: Oh, okay.

They're actually fine.

I'm just sort of all in on sort of the scams survey conspiracy.

Andy: Big survey.

They don't they big survey.

Matt: He doesn't want us to talk about this.

Andy: Where were you during the Panama excavation when J. Russell Smith was surveying the lands?

Matt: Yeah.

Andy: Mr.

Mumford at the age of 12.

Yeah.

The most niche jokes.

Matt: The rebar cabal is what I call them.

Andy: Yeah.

Matt: The flagging tape cabal.

Anyway, sorry.

I'm sorry.

Andy: You should be.

This has been one of the more unhinged starts to an episode, Matt.

The niche jokes are too niche.

People are not getting any of it.

But that's okay.

It's okay.

We'll let it slide.

I think this points to another really important piece.

Like this is like that bioregionalism concept that I think that's caught a lot of attention in the last couple decades.

But of course, this kind of goes against that Odums concept, right, of most efficient thing and instead it's about the complexity of that place and tapering expectations based on the living, existing, metaphorically living existing things that already exist there as well and this is, I think, a recurring theme that we're going to see play out in a lot of this.

eco defense stuff that as we get into this more modern era, right? Like I said, it might seem like we're just dipping our toes into these weird historical tidbits and figures, but all this will kind of come together and show a bigger narrative about how

we can better understand what's happening today in eco defense, eco nihilism, fascism, eco fascism.

as we're seeing it play out in real time now.

Matt: Don't worry folks, he's got a plan.

Andy: I've always got a plan.

Matt: I've always got a plan and I just know our listeners are kind of waiting with bated breath for that Ted K content.

Andy: And there's good reason because he just doesn't fit into any easy box.

Same with our BFF Luigi, right? But those types of characters don't come out of nowhere, right? And a phrase I use personally a lot is rational people don't do irrational things.

So if something seems irrational, there's something you just don't know yet and that's what we're trying to do is explore what we might not know.

So in the 1920s, Mumford translated this ecological theory into activism by co-founding the Regional Planning Association of America, or the RPAA, which I'm sure many of our listeners are also supporting.

Their mission was fundamentally ecological and they wanted to resist what they called the insensate industrial town and that is a place without feeling of sense of the paleotechnic era.

which was polluting the environment and degrading what they considered the human personality.

Matt: Oh my God.

Get these people into the metaverse.

They're going to love it.

Andy: Horrors behind his.

You know, they say the European mind cannot comprehend.

Matt: Yeah.

Andy: The Lewis Mumford mind cannot comprehend the metaverse.

Matt: Strap him in, strap him down.

Andy: Clockwork Orange style.

Matt: Yeah.

Andy: Now their solution was what they call the Garden City ideal and that was this idea of a limited size town surrounded by nature.

Matt: I mean, it's also like pretty interesting because both capitalist and socialist systems are rushing to industrialize and like extract as fast as possible and the RPA was like setting itself up in opposition to both of these like organizational paradigms.

How did they justify their model politically and economically when on sort of both sides of the divide was like a trend towards centralization?

Andy: Yeah, it's interesting because if you think about like the 1920s, 30s, 40s, you have this mass, like which side can figure out how to industrialize and provide more faster, right? Who can get to, who can develop technology faster? the five-year plans and so on.

There was so much push towards this idea of brute force and then they were like, what? **** both of you.

Which is cool, but also, it was a bold play, right? And they found a lot of their ideological backing from Kropotkin.

Mumford saw Kropotkin as the thinker who had laid the basis for what he called a new biotechnic regime.

Kropotkin provided for Mumford the economic justification for decentralization through his vision of what he considered a neotechnic life economy.

This approach basically promoted industrial decentralization and the combination of like industry with agriculture within a region.

Again, those bioregional ideas.

For Mumford, the metropolis was an agent to solidify state and bureaucratic power, and you couldn't consolidate power without the creation of these massive urban spaces.

Matt: I guess these ideas must have, you can see like echoes of these ideas in like David Graeber's essays.

Andy: Yeah, you see this like, I don't want to say like anti-civ, but like there's this very like, I guess anti-civ bent to the concept.

even though there was this concept of small cities and so on, and the ideas of appropriate technologies and stuff, you can see that influence on Bookchin, who then was an influence on Graeber.

So it is kind of like this giant game of telephone, right? Bookchin cited Mumford as actually the second biggest influence on his work, only behind Kropotkin.

So yeah, again, Mumford is that big figure on the left you've probably never heard of.

Matt: Okay, so I'm just looking and this like, he wrote so many books.

It's like, I don't know.

Andy: It's crazy.

Matt: It's kind of wild that he's like not this, just like household name.

Andy: Just like Kropotkin and.

Matt: Or like, I don't know, like niche household name, like Kropotkin and books. Chivian Graver would be.

Yeah, okay.

Andy: He was super prolific.

Matt: Dorm dorm room name.

Andy: Yeah.

University of Stony Brook ***** household name.

Yeah.

Matt: ***** Stony Brook.

I swear to God.

Andy: ***** Stony Brook.

The problem with his books is that they're just massive.

Like is that I can't actually tell you what the average is, but if I were to guess based on the books I've seen, they're probably 400 plus pages a book.

So like not only is there like 30 something books he wrote, but they're all just absurdly large and he was a brilliant dude and I think like a common thread we've seen with some of the people we've talked about is he could go toe to toe with leaders in like several fields, the same way like J.

Russell Smith could on all of the things he did, the same way Liberty Hyde Bailey could do.

He fell into that same type of category.

He was a specialist in many things, top of his field.

Now, Mumford utilized Kropotkin's framework in what he called his major histories, which was this idea of tracing the evolution of industrial culture through what Gettys had developed as phases.

The first being what he called the eotechnic, which is kind of like pre-civilization, you might want to call it, right? It was based on the utilization of wood, water, wind, relied on renewable resources and then there was the paleotechnic, which was when coal was developed with iron, And this was very destructive and it was fostering the culture that was necessary to ignore the natural organic processes and then you have from the paleotechnic, the neotechnic, which is where electricity and alloys came to be and this is kind of the time he was living, right? He was optimistic that electricity would be this clean and mobile energy source that could be traveled far distances very easily and it would help facilitate decentralization and help restore what he considered the three vital pieces that needed to be an equilibrium for society to work and that was humans and nature, industry and agriculture, and then populations.

So in his most optimistic phase, he felt that the neotechnic complex would naturally transition to what he called a biotechnic one and that was basically this concept of technics or a way of living based on the culture of life.

Matt: I mean, that's pretty interesting given like, so rebirth lately and some fascinating the like mycotech, like running the computers on mushrooms and stuff.

Andy: Yeah, I think like, now we see a lot of research going into like mimicking nature biomimicry, right? Or I don't know if biomimicry is when animals do it.

I don't know what it's called when we do it with tech, but I guess mimicry, right? So I think that's kind of where he thought things would go more quickly as opposed to what's happened instead and I think he believed in the natural evolution into what we might call like solarpunk today.

He had cautious optimism for the neotechnic age and it did not survive the mid 20th century.

Matt: Not a great time to be an anarchist.

Andy: No.

The rise of the totalitarian states and the advent of nuclear weapons, which Mumford openly condemned in 1946, stating in quote, gentlemen, you are mad.

Matt: Andy, you got to do the voice.

Andy: Gentlemen, you are mad.

Like that?

Matt: Yeah.

Andy: Was that good?

Matt: That was exactly.

Andy: You heard it.

You were there.

Matt: I want Dom, can you just cut that in? Just.

Andy: So he wasn't super happy about it.

It made him real ***** depressed, basically and it shifted his tone and it became really clear when he started writing about and critiquing what he called the mega machine and I'm sure you guys know just from the name of that, it's a really good thing, right? He wasn't really just criticizing physical technology, but the pervasive ideology of the power behind the technology.

He argued that the modern, what he called Pentagon of Power, which comprised of the military-industrial complex and its technological arsenal, was basically a new hierarchy of the ancient human labor machines used by the pharaohs.

Matt: And, you know, we don't do enough criticism of the pharaohs.

it's always like feudal lords and kings and no kings, but Pharaohs kind of had a lot of that going on.

Andy: They ***** ** too.

Yeah.

Matt: They ***** ** too.

Andy: Make Pharaoh hate again.

Matt: Bumper sticker for the episode, done.

Andy: Done.

Now, the ideology underlying this concept of the mega machine is that it ignores the needs and purposes of life in order to basically consolidate and fortify power.

Again, this is the 1940s we're writing about this and think about how things have gone technologically and he argued that it was fueled by capitalism's centralization of money and the belief that, in his words, quantitative production had no natural limits either.

So Mumford attacked what he considered overcommitment to science and technology, which viewed technological and technical advances as ends in themselves.

Again, Yeah.

He warned that this pursuit of power led directly to what he considered ecological suicide.

Matt: I mean, and this all feels very relevant as we like watch the rise of AI and like watch the like rise of the data centers.

Andy: What, you don't need AI to be able to use Uber? Matt, you don't need to drain 5,000 gallons of water for Uber to know where you need them.

Matt: No, I kind of think that it like was doing okay in 2015.

Should have just freeze it there.

Andy: Yeah.

I mean, I would go further back, but you weren't alive for then.

I would say if we had to go back to perfect time, it was like 2002.

That was a good year, right around then.

Matt: For taxis.

Andy: No, for technology.

Matt: Oh, interesting.

Andy: But I think this whole thing, like you can see that it was evident where things were going 80 years ago, right? And that's really depressing, but it also made him realize that there needed to be a more radical solution than reform.

He felt that the problem laid deeply in this ingrained mechanistic outlook, which he felt needed to be replaced entirely.

Mumford's final powerful answer to the mega machine was the biotechnic order.

He devoted the closing chapters of his two books, *The Culture of Cities* and *The Pentagon of Power* to outlining this necessary civilization.

Matt: So how did Mumford define like the new civilization, which he like considered specifically designed to counteract the, like what he was defining as the mega machine?

Andy: So before we get into that explicitly, I want to bring up the Odom Brothers again because it offers, I think, a really, really important juxtaposition.

Matt: Oh **** we know it's about to get deep because Andy's breaking out juxtaposition.

Andy: It's that three cent word.

Watch out.

Matt: Move them out, folks.

Andy: Now, the Odom's whole thing was ecological systems and centering energy efficiency, right? They focused on this idea of EROI or energy returned on energy.

It didn't matter the cascading impacts of invasive species, right, because the ecology was being more efficient, which meant less entropy and more energy available for the system to be resilient.

Their vision for the future was framed on what the planet could withstand effectively, right? The ecosystem was an engine that you didn't want to redline was kind of their idea, and they envisioned systems planning around those feedback systems.

Now, ethics were framed based on ecological energy efficiency.

Thermodynamics were the foundation of a healthy society for the Odoms, and whatever those limitations were dictated humanity, for better or worse, which on its surface doesn't sound all that bad.

But we explored why this fails any pushback.

Because then it's no surprise when we try to beat up these kinds of positions to see how strong they are that they kind of leaned into eco-fascism in their later years because a human-centered ethic was lacking.

Matt: You gotta, what don't these people understand? You've gotta have the human-centered ethic.

Andy: Gotta have it and fundamentally what happened was that the solution was if there's finite energy, who gets it? Because that was their general focus.

One of my favorite stories from one of their former students was talking about how they basically said the West should use up all the oil so that the communists don't get it.

as if there's no consequences for that and that fundamentally I think puts that position at a very different perspective, even though they might sound very similar to something like what Lewis Mumford is talking about.

Mumford proposed that societies and specifically industrial spaces should be guided by ethics first before considering environmental limitations.

Now your first response might be, well, if the planet dies, then ethics don't matter.

But instead, and this is something we've been beating the drum on basically whenever I can, is that ethical societies tend to self-regulate within the confines of their ecological limitations.

As our old friend Russell Lord, who is writing just around the same time once said, ecological problems are social problems.

This is a really important wedge to understand between the fascist eco-nihilist movement and the left-wing eco-defense movement and the question really becomes, which side do you see fixing the problem, right?

Matt: So in other words, while the environment is our lifeline, if we try to fix it without fixing our relations to one another, then we bring out the worst traits of humanity in order to survive.

the environment for our individual like selfish reasons.

But if we fix the environment in defense of others in like kinship with other living things, we have a land-based understanding of like what's necessary for sustainability in all relations.

Andy: Yeah.

Matt: Kind of based on context and not an abstract problem that needs to be solved at whatever means necessary without considering its impacts as a whole.

I think Peter Gelderloose makes the point to an extent in the solutions are already here.

Andy: Yeah, he talks about like why fixating on carbon is a failure because it doesn't contextualize why carbon is building up in the atmosphere, which is a much more complex and difficult problem to address as long as like industrial society functions as it does.

Like carbon scrubbers don't address the fact that all those other pieces don't exist anymore, those relations don't exist anymore and if we fix the carbon problem, we're still heading towards ecological disaster in 100 different other ways and there's a long thread on the left that needs to be understood.

Otherwise, it's very easy to see how people can fall into this like.

fascistic thinking around eco-defense, right? It's the same reason that place-based ecological relations is so important and why movements like permaculture sometimes, and this of course is not a criticism of everyone in the movement, but the framework for it fundamentally fails, right? It's the same reason we watched so many left-wing figures before World War II suddenly swing from socialist to fascist, if you guys remember when we did that last season, we were talking about the 1920s, 30s, 40s, right? These 2 very similar seeming arguments send you down very different paths of understanding and relating to both ecological and economic crises, right? And this is really incredibly important to understand in the current global climate.

Matt: It's like fundamentally about.

relations to the conditions where you live, like within your historical context.

Andy: And not to completely beat the listen to our old content story to death, but this is also the reason why someone like Liberty Hyde Bailey is so important of a figure for the left to both claim and read and in many ways, he was kind of the counterweight to Lewis Mumford and it's not a surprise then that Mumford and Bailey were also the two biggest influencers on another guy most listeners probably respect very immensely, Wendell Berry.

Matt: I mean, that makes a lot of sense.

Andy: Yeah, and to get back, I guess, then to Mumford, right? Not only was he a huge influence on a lot of people that people today listening to this look up to and admire, but he like, there's a good reason for it, right? And he was talking about, to get back to what he was writing about, he was talking about this idea of how do we counteract what he called the mega machine, which is basically the big enchilada of global capitalist industrialism.

What he proposed was what he called a biotechnic regime.

Now the biotechnic regime is a civilization in which the biological sciences are freely applied to technology and technologies itself is oriented towards the culture of, well, life.

It's a system that's derived directly from living organisms and living complex systems and it's meant to replace the mechanical ideology and fundamentally some of the mechanics itself.

Matt: Now that solar punk sticker.

Andy: Exactly.

Like I think a lot of solar punk does pull from Mumford directly, whether or not it realizes it and Mumford emphasized that this is a comprehensive philosophical shift and where he felt that we must move from a world where mechanical motion is prioritized to what he called, end quote, to a world in which invisible rays and emanations in which human projections and dreams are as real as any immediately visible or external phenomenon, end quote and this change is really rooted in observed scientific reality, again, heavily influenced by his good friend Kropotkin.

There's three points he makes again, and I want this to be considered again in comparison to the Odoms, because the Odoms were just starting up at this time when he was writing in his later years.

So these ideas were being created at the same time.

So it's really interesting because you get two very different perspectives on the same thing happening and how they influenced these lines of thought, right? The Odoms were young at this time, Mumford is older, so they're seeing it from very different lenses and you can see how those paths went very differently.

So his three points are that life takes precedence and the relocation of interest towards the living and the organic.

He argued that this orientation gives the organism in the world of life the priority that had been previously accorded to the machine.

So I think from the perception of should we do this in this place? Is it good for us as humans versus it good for my technology that I need, right? The second is that technology imitates life.

He felt that things like the airplane, movies, phonographs, whatever technology was popular at the time, they were all derived in part from the detailed study of living organisms.

Like where did we get the idea of wings on a plane, right? He felt that modern architecture, which uses new materials and new means of basically making the walls living in some capacity, could come from the biotechnics of gardening and the more perfect the machine becomes, the more it simulates the automations of real organisms, as well as even the self-regulating components of it, which I think, I'm not a tech person, but I think in a ideal world, AI could really function in that way, right? Where it could step in and be that thinking component for self-regulating equipment, machines and so on.

I have no hope for that.

But I think like in an ideal utopian world, that's something we could consider and then the third one was metaphysical support and this is supported by like a lot of the philosophical thinkers at the time whose work provided like concepts for metaphysics and orientation And really what it boiled down to was this idea of like we needed to move beyond qualitative life affirming goals, which today we'd say is like holistic ideas, right?

Matt: Okay, so if like the philosophy of biotechnics is organic, how does that translate into like political action and AKA also partly like economic policy.

Like what does like society look like?

Andy: In this world.

Matt: Yeah.

Andy: So basically just his argument is like we have to reverse our priorities as a global economy.

Matt: Oh, just that one.

Andy: Just that.

Matt: Just that.

Andy: He argues that we've forgotten the purpose of existence and like the primacy of life.

He felt that interests and activities that give us reason for wanting to live like hobbies, education, welfare, health, those have to come first.

What he called instrumental processes like raw materials extraction have to be put second and regulated not by market standards but by the higher needs of man with the idea of basically use what you need, right?

Matt: And I know I'm sure that in practicality there's like some pretty strong ideas of the commons around that.

Andy: Yeah, and I think that is just like fundamental to like how do you do, how do you produce in order to meet people's needs and not profit, right? And he argued that like consumption itself really had to be directed towards the conservation and enhancement of life.

Again, going back to those qualitative standards and that is, health, well-being, something he wrote about quite extensively is what he called the culture of the human personality and the perfection of the natural and civic environment.

Matt: This just sounds like anti-GDP propaganda.

Andy: Oh, it absolutely is.

Matt: And I want it off the air.

Andy: Yeah, if you don't like anti-GDP propaganda, you're in for a rude awakening.

He argued for what he called community core, which sounds like cottage core, but cooler, right? While the factory was the nucleus or what he considered the nucleus of the paleotechnic community, right, the industry, the city, the center, he felt that the house was to become the nucleus or the center of the biotechnic age and the idea was that new communities must be designed on a human scale within relation to home, not in relation to development in industry.

Matt: Politically, this means Kirk Hopkins influence is like still essential here, right? Like to prevent the new system from becoming yet another bureaucracy.

Andy: Exactly.

He everything that Mumford developed was like at its core anti-centralization and to him, urban spaces were de facto centralized power and for him, the political and economic foundation had to be based on regional integration and decentralization.

This required socializing planning to meet the needs that basically the capitalist economy ignores and ultimately, the biotechnic civilization is about maximizing potential and not in economic terms.

The idea isn't that the machine disappears, but is brought back under human control.

The aim of the economy is not to feed more humans into the machine, but to, in his words, develop further man's incalculable potentialities for self-actualization and self-transcendence, which sounds pretty nice.

Matt: Now that's what I'm talking about.

Andy: Yeah.

So you saw these experimental communities like the garden cities, which were cities that stayed below certain sizes and demanded specific amounts of green space as well as access to local farms and social services as what he called prophetic emergence of this coming order.

So you've probably heard about garden cities if you've done any research into like, what does a society look like that doesn't collapse or can be sustainable? You'll see garden cities come up a lot.

You probably won't hear them talk about this part of it and to that point, we're probably also the only podcast to talk about Mumford and not really even discuss garden cities.

Matt: Yeah, suck on that.

Andy: Suck on that.

Matt: All you garden city heads.

Andy: Garden heads, get out of here.

So his final act And as he got older, he was more aggressively political with his writing, was to give us the philosophical model, which is the shift from what he called power to plenitude for the universal rebuilding of city and what he considered the recovery of purpose and it was this philosophy of our relations with the world around us, which continues to be reinterpreted by new thinkers, whether it's Bookchin or Oshelon and whoever may be next in analyzing a world of like post AI.

Fingers crossed.

Matt: Just AI.

Fingers.

Andy: Yes.

AI will edit that so it cuts out the post.

Matt: Yeah, please, keep us online and alive in our matrix cells.

Wow, Louis Mumford.

What a guy.

Andy: What a guy.

Matt: And we didn't even talk about his sons.

Andy: You've been sitting on that ***** joke for like 3 months now.

Matt: Who? Yeah.

Andy: You.

So interesting guy, wrote a lot of stuff.

We managed to knock out a lot of content today, despite the fact I feel like we didn't actually talk about much of his actual life or his work.

Because again, I didn't want to go into a multi-episode on this one.

Matt: This guy loves a multi-episode.

Andy: I do, and I couldn't do it again for you people.

So I think this is like a really good framework to contextualize what was going on in urban development.

As ecological issues were coming up and like what kind of resistance there was in that urban space and this will be a really interesting pairing with next week's episode of Edward Abbey, which is like the complete opposite, right? And then again, you'll see some of those really interesting ideas of what constitutes radical action and how does that get couched within like a political ideal and again, then we really start to get into some of these conversations around the manipulation of political ideas into the modern era.

So we've covered some good stuff and I'm looking forward to doing more.

Matt: Yeah, so look out for all that jazz.

Andy: So look out for all that jazz and if you're listening to this on Spotify or iTunes or whatever it is, well, first off, get off Spotify.

But if you are, go, if you can wait for Edward Abbey, it'll be out now.

If you're listening, if you don't have Patreon, you just got to go jump on Patreon to listen to it.

You can also support us over there, check out our sub stack with all the sources and fun stuff for our episodes and that's pretty much it.

Matt, you got anything I missed?

Matt: No.

Andy: Cool.

Matt: That was off the dome, Yeah, fresh. Fresh.

Andy: Fresh cooked.

Matt: All right, listeners.

Andy: We'll see you around, or not, because this is audio, so we won't see you.

Matt: For sure.

Andy: We will see you.

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