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A Review of Kate Daloz’s *We Are as Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America*

Kate Daloz’s *We Are as Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America* is a compelling and insightful account of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement. Daloz traces the birth of the commune in America, drawing on the stories of her parents, Larry and Judy, who played a key role in the growth of the movement. This well-researched chronicle is told through the lens of Myrtle Hill, a commune that sprung up on a muddy farm in the woods of Vermont. At a time when the prosperity of the post-war era hollowed, and the orthodoxy of official American culture drove even the wealthy to despair, Daloz proves that the back-to-the-land movement was more than a manifestation of disaffected anti-capitalist idealism. It was a sustained and
successful movement to remake lives outside of a system that felt intractable, yet doomed to fail.

Daloz’s style reads at times like a documentary history, at times like an extended lyric essay. The blend is pleasing, particularly during vignettes of day-to-day commune life, or stories of the many vibrant characters that populate the book—like Loraine the silent anchor of Myrtle Hill, who impresses a Tibetan Buddhist monk, or Chico the nudist architect. Though We Are As Gods examines a historical movement, it avoids overly theoretical digging, aiming instead for individual narratives and detailed character development.

Daloz outlines the rise and fall of communal living experiments, social activism, and the attempts of the disaffected to live off the land in acts of “voluntary primitivism.” While these back-to-the-land efforts boasted an environmentally friendly lifestyle and a rural education that had previously evaded city folk and suburbanites, Daloz addresses the potentially life-threatening situations that arise in the face of self-sufficiency. The quality of shelter becomes dependent on learned skills, which leads to bitter winter drafts or timber homes going up in flames.

The first major question that arises strikes at the core of the movement, drives the book forward, and remains highly relevant today in the face of communalist movements: “How do you maintain a leaderless system and a do-your-own-thing freedom while also making sure that the group has what it needs to survive?” Daloz provides potential answers to this question throughout her book by hopping from one commune, like Myrtle Hill, to another, like Entropy Acres. As her characters grow restless and move across the country to explore other communes and gather resources, Daloz describes successes and failures within the movements. In one example, a hippie commune operates without a leader, which solves the problem by not addressing it. Everyone smokes pot, does drugs, and fights against monogamy. On the other hand, there is the regimented Reality Construction Company, that has no tolerance for spiritual frivolity and laziness. As Daloz explores these experiments, she reveals the contradictory elements of the back-to-the-land movement. One failure, for instance, is the homogeneity of its members in terms of race and class. Daloz recounts Nina Simone’s comment, “Lou, there aren’t any black people here,” on her visit to Lou Gottlieb’s Digger Farm commune.

Daloz’s work is instructive and indubitably useful for a hopeful modern back-to-the-lander. At the same time, the book paints an engaging narrative that raises questions about the possibility of truly revolutionary egalitarian living within a capitalist society, and brings readers along for an insightful look into the back-to-the-land movement’s rise and decline.

The release of We Are As Gods is timely, even prescient. It explores a cultural milieu some of us are still struggling to preserve against the setbacks of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. In a moving section, Daloz chronicles the
People’s Park protests of 1969 Berkeley, and unflinchingly portrays the brutal repression students faced under Governor Ronald Reagan. The anti-war movement during the Vietnam era was the largest protest movement to date, until the election of Donald Trump. As students afraid—like many are—of what the future holds under an authoritarian government, *We Are As Gods* provides a dynamic example of the trials, tribulations, and complex responses of students and young people searching for a response to a failing system.