

Gracie and Zarkov Interview

Terence McKenna

1993

Gracie and Zarkov: Why did you write *Food of the Gods*?

Terence McKenna: I felt if I could change the frame of the argument and get drugs insinuated into a scenario of human origins, then I would cast doubt on the whole paradigm of Western civilization, in the same way that realizing that we came from monkeys did a great deal to reset the dials in the 19th century Victorian mind. If you could convince people that drugs were responsible for the emergence of large brain size and language, then you could completely recast the argument from, "Drugs are alien, invasive and distorting to human nature," to, "Drugs are natural, ancient and responsible for human nature." So it was consciously propaganda, although I believe all that and I believe it's going to be hard to knock down.

G&Z: Who is your target audience?

TM: The target audience will be the converted first of all, but my hope is that the engines of public relations and publicity will move it much more into the mainstream, the 18 to 25-year-old group that is drug-friendly but has no rationale except that it's a good time. This book is what I want every coed next fall to be carrying to Anthro 101 to beard the professor with.

You've heard me talk about meme wars, and how if we could have a level playing field these ideas would do very well. The theory I'm putting forth to disprove it, you would have to get your feet wet and get stoned. Anybody who doesn't want to do that should rule themselves off the case. So that presents academic types with a real problem.

G&Z: If you're going to challenge the conclusions you must come to grips with the empirical facts of being high.

TM: That's right. It's not a metaphysical argument or an emotional plea, it's an argument on their own terms. Can they do better? What was happening?

I think we should look at the impact of diet and realize that what you eat changes the parameters of the environment that is selecting you. I found no discussion of the impact of diet on human evolution, and yet at the very moment that the great [primate] evolutionary leaps were being made there was a transformation of the diet towards omnivorousness, meat eating, predation, away from the fruitarian original state.

I'm not saying that civilization fucked up what was otherwise a naturally occurring politically correct situation. There was a period when, because of the presence of psilocybin in the diet, the natural tendency to male dominance hierarchies was interrupted. It was in that moment that community values, altruism, language, long-term planning, awareness of cause and effect, all the things that distinguish us were established. Then, as the mushroom became less available due to climatological factors after 15,000 years of this human-mushroom quasi-symbiosis, the old dominance hierarchy hardwiring reasserted itself in the ancient Middle East with the invention of agriculture, the need to become sedentary in order to carry out agriculture, the need to defend surplus, the establishment of kingship. These are a reassertion of an older pattern that had been interrupted by a factor in the diet which basically made people mellow.

G&Z: Did that interruption occur throughout the entire human genome, or are there areas which would have been outside the mushroom Garden?

TM: People have been migrating out of Africa during each interglacial. I think the mushroom was having an effect in Africa over the last three million years, but what really kicked the process into high gear was that during the last interglacial true pastoralism evolved. All previous migrations out of Africa were the migrations of hunter-gatherers. The migration that began at the melting of the last glaciation about 18,000 years ago were the first herders out of Africa. It's the cattle/human/mushroom triad that reinforces the partnership, non-dominant, orgiastic style.

I talk in the book about how apparently at a certain point in the evolution of human cognition cause removed from effect became something that people noticed. At the very moment that men were realizing that the consequences of sex were children 9 months later, women were realizing that the consequences of tossing trash onto middens was food availability in those very spots 12 months later. This ability to correlate a cause with a delayed effect indicates a certain level of neurological processing that sets the stage for the suppression of orgy, because the suppression of orgy is linked to a concern for male paternity. Before you know that sex leads to children, all children are the tribe's children. Women know who their children are, but for men, children are group resources. Once you put the male paternity thing together, the notion of ownership soon follows. The idea is that psilocybin is an egolytic compound, that orgies every new and full moon, everybody screwing in a heap, makes it impossible to form these notions of my women, my children, my weapons, my food and so forth.

G&Z: What do you mean by the term ego?

TM: I'm assuming a Jungian vocabulary. The ego is not the self. The ego is a nexus of strategies for short-term gain at the expense of group values and even long-term personal gain.

G&Z: If for the North African herders the primate hierarchical programs were broken down by mushrooms, would it be correct to say that the European Paleolithic hunters on the edge of the ice sheet at 20,000 B.C. would still have the primate hierarchical programs because they had no access to mushrooms?

TM: Right. Basically, this mellowness was an African style, and it could only sustain itself as long as there was a plentiful supply of mushrooms and a religious institution that insisted on it being used. Here's the scenario: you have this climax Edenic partnership society based on orgies and mushrooms and herding, and the drying continues. The mushroom becomes less plentiful. It becomes localized. It becomes seasonal. The mushroom festivals become further and further apart. Eventually this is recognized; there is an anxiety to preserve the mushroom. The obvious strategy then is to put it into honey, but honey itself has the capacity to turn into a psychoactive substance, mead, a crude alcohol. So what begins as a mushroom cult, through a sincere effort to preserve the mushroom cult turns into a mead cult a few thousand years later, because the mushrooms are spread thinner and thinner and the honey is more and more the focus; but look at the consequences of an alcohol cult. Alcohol lowers sensitivity to social cueing while it increases a false sense of verbal facility, so it sets the stage for boorish behavior. From that comes the suppression of women as part of this bronze-tipped spear/grain surplus/city-building kingship/standing armies/turf-defending mentality that we find in the so-called proto-civilizations.

G&Z: OK, we've had firsthand experience with the tryptamine linguistic phenomena, so your language acquisition hypothesis is certainly as plausible as any other theory; moreso, since it can point to a mechanism. Otherwise you have to take on faith that some miracle happened to create self-reflection and linguistic capabilities.

What evidence is there for the orgiastic, cooperator model? Certainly the ecological catastrophe when the last glaciers retreated made war a survival skill. In Northern Europe, when all the game was hunted out, the skilled hunters started hunting the people on the other side of the hill. In the Middle East it was agriculture and grain surplus, as you say. So why hierarchy and violence become successful strategies is very clear. What is the evidence for the Edenic partnership model, and is such an extreme position necessary for your theory?

TM: Well, the evidence is twofold: first of all, the kind of attitudes you find in African nomadic herders today; for instance, the only time anybody ever offered me his wife was when I stayed with the Masai. Good hospitality dictates that the youngest wife spend the night with the guest.

G&Z: But these are wives owned by a particular husband.

TM: That's right. But still there is clearly a different attitude toward these women. They are not exclusively accessed by the husband. [No, he can hand them around to other men — is this a partnership mode of behavior? -G]

The other thing is the great horned Goddess, found throughout Paleolithic history — why horned? Cattle are the key, because cattle establish the presence of the mushroom. Cattle-based nomadism and horse-mounted nomadism are absolutely antithetical, because horse-mounted nomadism is based on an economy of plunder. Cattle-based nomadism is based on establishing a stable environment that is moving over a large area.

G&Z: Does that necessitate a partnership society as opposed to any other kind of social organization? It's the black and white dichotomy we're having trouble with.

TM: Well, it probably was not as black and white as I paint it because there must have been residual carry-over from this early level of primate programming. That's why I think a key feature is the mushroom religion and the frequency of these practices, because I think the ego will begin to form in the personality very quickly in the absence of psilocybin. You have to keep re-inoculating yourself against what is essentially an antisocial idea in those contexts. It's amazing to me that the male love of nookie would stand aside for the male love of property and dominance. That orgies were ever suppressed shows how strongly that must have been felt. They said, "A good time is fine, but the really important thing is to control women and property."

G&Z: There are two things that I would disagree with there. You assume that men make all the sexual decisions, not taking into account how much women choose their mates, even in a hierarchical society. And I'm not sure I see the direct connection between psilocybin use and orgiastic sexuality.

TM: Psilocybin creates arousal. So in a society exempt of Christian paranoia this group arousal would just naturally turn into orgy. If you're getting people together at every new and full moon and getting them loaded, they're going to fuck.

G&Z: OK, but why in orgies?

TM: Basically, because it's a boundary-dissolving stimulant. It would be interesting to give chimpanzees mushrooms and see whether they go into the corner of their cage and turn their faces away or whether they all jump each other.

G&Z: Is there a dosage issue here also?

TM: Well, there's a series of ascending doses. At very low doses you get measurable increases in visual acuity. This is the foot in the door from which all other consequences flow, because that will select against non-psilocybin-using members of the population; because they are less successful at hunting, less successful at feeding their offspring and bringing them to reproductive age. So on the next level you get arousal and sexual activity: a second factor selecting against non-using members of the population, because they are fucking less, presumably.

G&Z: But at visionary doses you don't want to do anything but watch.

TM: At visionary doses you become subject to glossolalia and language-forming activities. It's possible to imagine all three of these things happening to a single individual in a single afternoon. You take it at 4 p.m. In the first hour you kill an antelope that you have keenly observed, in the next hour you eat it with your mate and have great sex, and following that you're swept away by a psychedelic experience. That's a little extreme, but you can see how this could be happening on all levels.

G&Z: There's still a leap of faith in your description of the cultural complex. As psychedelic pagans in a long-term, sexually open, partnership relationship, we're close to your audience in many respects. But the discussion about dominator and partnership cultures reads like dogmatic preaching about good versus bad cultures.

TM: Well, not good cultures and bad, but adaptive and maladaptive. Pastoral nomadism is clearly a viable, open-ended strategy. [Until you overgraze the grasslands and the desert advances -G] The dominator thing can't be run for more than three or four thousand years before you are where we are: with limited resources, aggression carried beyond any reasonable level. It may be dogmatic.

G&Z: What is the dominator thing? Why not use existing terminology: authoritarianism, uptightness, sexual repression, totalitarianism, violence, etc. I guess that reading the book it's very hard for me to understand how I distinguish between Joe Stalin and John Kennedy.

TM: I think by this theory these guys are comrades in arms.

G&Z: That's where I have a problem. What have we done right in the last 10,000 years, as opposed to what is wrong and should be thrown away?

TM: Well, the answer is very little, consciously. It's almost as though we have designed culture as a suicide machine of some sort.

G&Z: Would you include Galileo, Locke, Voltaire and Jefferson in that?

TM: Yes and no. It depends on the frame. In the European Enlightenment these are the heroes, but the Enlightenment is a necessary response to medievalism and the Christian eschaton. So there has been progress, but always within the terms of the dominator culture. There's always been a fifth column, or a critical community or an underground; but notice how hard it is to push this agenda forward. You couldn't get people to sign on to the Bill of Rights right now.

G&Z: You couldn't get people to sign on to the Bill of Rights the first time. It was pushed through by an intellectual elite.

TM: Who were probably homosexuals, and therefore infected with this unconscious feminizing element.

G&Z: So the Bill of Rights is not an artifact of dominator culture but a resistance to it?

TM: Freeing slaves, the universal rights of man are feminist attitudes. So is anything that erodes the idea that the king at the center of the mandala city is the absolute arbiter of what should happen.

The fall away from the Edenic state in Africa didn't end at Sumer or Greece or Rome or Paris in the 1760s. It's still going on. So we're still losing touch even as we're reaching out to gain touch again. I think that the endpoint of male dominance is not even fascism but Nazism, where there's a racial element as well. Fascism, the only authentic political philosophy adumbrated in the 20th century, is the greatest distance from what we're trying to get to. I think society will definitely embrace fascism if it feels threatened by a return to Gaianic style.

G&Z: You're talking in terms of we and it and society. What happens to the individual? There is a difference between Napoleon and John Stuart Mill. But your book bashes Western civilization without making clear which concepts are the "ideals of a democratic society going forward into the future" and which are characteristic of a dominator culture.

TM: I guess the difference that we're uncovering here is that it sounds like you think it's 50/50, and I'm saying 95% of it was bunk. [We think 99% of human history was horrifying, but that key ideas and concepts were developed that are absolutely necessary to bail us out, including the scientific empirical foundation for Terence's ideas -G&Z] I think that anything that went on under the aegis of monotheism is horseshit.

G&Z: Most definitely. However, you point out that the polytheistic Hindus have a more feminist religion, yet in terms of the individual behavior of individual people towards women in that society — I sure won't sign up for that gig.

TM: Well, their problem is not monotheism. There's more than one way to fuck yourself up. Their problem is essentially a phonetic alphabet. The phonetic alphabet empowers a distancing and an abstracting from natural phenomena that is probably equal in power to what happens in monotheism. It's just that in the case of the West we got a full dose of both. There are non-phonetic ways to create sophisticated databases — the Chinese.

G&Z: Is the high Chinese culture a partnership society?

TM: Moreso than the West. If you look at the structure of Chinese marriage in the Tang dynasty, there's definitely male dominance, but on the other hand, shadow institutions were created to mitigate that dominance that we would never tolerate in the West. For instance, concubinage was tolerated in China, but the price paid for it was the right of inheritance of the primary wife and her control of the household. So there were trade-offs.

G&Z: Would it be fair to say that the biochemical matrix in which any human culture swims is shiftable by ideas, by ingestibles — food or drugs — and that there is a shifting center?

TM: Yes, and it's not randomly driven. A lot of this stuff is dictated by the vicissitudes of botany. The fact that the European continent was so poor in boundary-dissolving hallucinogens allowed the phonetic alphabet and the city-building kingship style to never really be challenged. [Except in 1600, 1789, 1848, 1918, 1991? -Z]

The Maya, for example, are a different situation. They clearly had to accommodate to living in tropical rainforests replete with hallucinogenic drugs. They were still able to organize slave labor and have kingship and warfare. But the very baroque, ritual nature of it — the way that Venus regulated their warfare up until the collapse of the proto-Classic phase — meant that other factors were mitigating these tendencies; and I'm sure that it was probably the dependency of the elite on hallucinogens. The level of adornment in these vase paintings indicates to me that the elite was probably homosexual in style and thereby feminized, and there are many powerful women in the lineage of the Mayan royalty.

All of these societies that have arisen in the context of what we call civilization are not models for what we want to do. It's an incredibly radical rejection to say everything from Sumer, essentially all of history, is a mistake. History itself is a mistake. The Archaic Revival, if carried out to any degree at all, would mark the most radical reconstruction of civilization that's ever taken place.

G&Z: Do you propose giving up science and technology and the few accomplishments of history? Would you be happiest going back to being a Paleolithic pastoralist?

TM: No, I think it's a forward escape. With three to five billion people on

the earth we are not going to return to pastoral herding on the plains of anywhere. What can we take from that model and preserve?

My idea of the perfect future is: the scene opens on a world that appears totally primitive. People are naked, people are orgiastic, people are nomadic; but when they close their eyes there are menus hanging in space. Culture has been internalized. Culture is supposed to be internalized. All this talk about virtual reality — people don't seem to notice *this* is a virtual reality. These are all ideas, ideas that have been forced into matter so that we could live in a reconstruction of our imagination, and deconstructing these virtual realities in which we live is the only way to get back to some sort of baseline of what it is to be human; and then you can carry culture with you. Culture was never meant to be materially realized. Culture is an intellectual object like a philosophy or a belief system.

G&Z: The ultimate Platonistic statement there.

TM: Well, it's an attractor around which we orbit.

G&Z: Let's just concede that we disagree about anthropology and history; but we both agree we're in a mess. How do we go forward from here? We have five to seven billion human beings; we have a stable high-tech culture; the optimistic projection is that there will be 12 to 15 billion human beings in 2050. How do we get from here to there? How many people get to go?

TM: I was challenged by someone who said, "Well, you're always talking to these mushrooms. Why don't you ask them how to save the world?" The next time I was stoned I asked, "How can we save the world?" and the mushroom said, "Each woman should bear only one natural child." It didn't hesitate for a moment.

If every woman were to have but one natural child the population of the earth would drop by 50% in the next 45 years. Without warfare, without migration, without artificially created epidemic diseases or relocation and horror on a massive scale. Now, someone will say, "But how are you going to convince women in Bangladesh to limit their reproductive activity?" Good point, but a woman who has a child in Malibu — that child will have 800 to 1,000 times more negative impact on resources than a child born to a woman in Bangladesh. We're crazy to preach limited reproduction to women in the Third World when if you convert one woman in Malibu to the idea of not having a child it's like converting 1,000 women in the backstreets of Dhaka. Now, this woman in Malibu is very probably college-educated, completely media-sophisticated and open to all the arguments and styles of persuasion to which we are familiar. In other words, she's the easy person to convince. She doesn't argue that she is Hindu or Catholic and can't go along with it.

G&Z: Forty years from now you've got North American and European population decreasing. I still don't see how you have Asia's population decreasing.

TM: Well, in Southeast Asia, if they expect to maintain the newly-emerging higher standard of living they must educate their people, and with that process of education is going to come a natural reluctance to have children.

G&Z: Then your argument and my argument as a developmental capitalist are essentially the same.

TM: Why is this not being preached everywhere? It's because nobody has figured out how you make a buck in a situation of retreating demographics.

G&Z: The drive to reproduce — sociobiologically entrained in the wetware — is generally reinforced by most social belief systems, economic theories, religions, etc. Isn't it time to rethink our relationship with our unconscious drive to reproduce?

TM: One of the things that fascinates me about this idea of one woman/one child is that here's a plan to save the world, the implementation of which would rest in the hands of women. Women have been squawking that they are powerless, they are imprisoned within a set of male dominator conceptions that make it impossible for them to do anything. [Some of us haven't, like the Mondo matriarchy -G] You could go to a woman on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and say, "How would you like to have more leisure time, how would you like to increase your income and how would you like to move to the forefront of political heroism by these acts?" Finally we have a solution which simultaneously appeals to people's most venal drives, and the political consequences of it are correct.

G&Z: I would have agreed with that twenty years ago. Propagandizing for one or fewer children would certainly help women, who have had to swim upstream against social pressure; social pressures which are more powerful in poor and traditional societies. Right now, increasing affluence reduces fertility. As long as they have contraceptive techniques and they don't have authorities like the Catholic Church or their parents or their husbands blocking them, they will be receptive to your propaganda, and not just in the First World. If it weren't for the traditions forbidding frank and scientifically accurate talk about sex, you could broadcast this message — not only to educated and affluent women, but illiterate and poor ones, too — everyone reachable by what, in the book, you call the TV drug.

TM: Well, you have capitalism and the Church and tradition generally all mitigating against this. These things have to be consciously denounced. Hitler was an amateur at the creation of human misery compared to the role that the Catholic Church is playing.

G&Z: What do you mean by capitalism?

TM: Well, capitalism requires consumers. In a retreating demographic situation it's hard to see — every capitalist wants to expand his market share. How can he do this if there are fewer and fewer consumers?

G&Z: The *Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal* suggest that smaller families with higher standards of living are the only way to save the world, and that is good for business.

TM: But they don't conclude how small the family should be. What is currently thought by people who don't think much about it is that it's good to have two children. No one who is ecologically sensitive wants to have three or four, so if you explain to them that two is no longer politically correct...

So, women taking control, having only one child, then a dematerialism of culture. And somehow capitalism, if it's truly the system under which we are all going to live, has to carry out a complete critique of its premises and we have to learn how to sell something other than objects.

G&Z: That's happening.

TM: I think it's happening. I am not a catastrophist at all. I think that the trends are in place to create the kind of world that we can all put up with; but it will be, consciously or unconsciously, a neoarchaic world. It's going to be nomadic; it's going to de-emphasize material culture; it's going to be erotically permissive; it's going to de-emphasize having large numbers of children. I don't think I'm discovering the answers.

G&Z: That's our vision of a more perfect future, too, at least on this planet.

TM: This is why virtual reality, hokey and bizarre as it is, is interesting, because what it clearly is is an effort to sell something which is nothing. With virtual reality, if you want to live in the Frank Lloyd Wright Waterfall House, it's \$895 off the shelf.

G&Z: And Disneyland is ecologically less destructive than having people trekking all over the wilderness all over the planet.

TM: I think that capitalism should be intelligent enough to dematerialize itself. I mean, capitalism is not necessarily a materialistic theory, it's just that on the crude level of culture the only thing you can sell are things.

G&Z: During this current recession, companies selling high-tech things are doing very badly. Companies selling high-tech concepts are doing very well. There's definitely a move towards selling abstract embodiments of ideas — call them intellectual property processes — 21st century capitalism.

TM: Virtual reality, if perfected, would allow the energy of capitalism to flow entirely into this virtual realm. Then if people wanted to live in outrageously gaudy and overdone environments, at least let them be virtual.

G&Z: Going back to Dhaka, where they're still selling women into slavery — you have to reach at least a late 19th century North American level of development before the propaganda you're talking about is going to work. You have to get that far out of traditional culture.

TM: To do this you have to back away from the male dominant paradigm of military defense. Why is no one saying, "Let's negotiate an international agreement that no army shall be more than 200,000 men"? Then no one can claim threat, and armies all over the world can be reduced, but to a level such that they can still carry out a fair defense if necessary.

G&Z: What about radical Islam, my favorite 21st century military problem?

TM: Radical Islam could be unplugged by putting in place a set of international agreements of such strength that we can say, "Have any kind of government you want, but when you start building weapons of mass destruction the cops will come knocking on your door to take them away."

G&Z: You'd be surprised how many of your ideas are getting currency in the *Economist*.

TM: Europe is way out front on all this. The United States is essentially in a reactionary stance. We are passionately anti-internationalist and we have a dream of world dominance that is inappropriately 19th century.

G&Z: What practical steps would you suggest to convince the people and the government of democracies such as the United States to legalize drugs?

TM: Well, I laid out a ten point program in the book. If people are informed of the facts, that's all that has to be done. Facts such as the true dangers of heroin relative to alcohol. The true facts concerning government connivance in promoting sugar, alcohol, tobacco and caffeine over other drugs.

G&Z: The relative harmlessness of the psychedelics in a social context.

TM: Yes. Basically, we're living inside a reality created by master propagandists. The media is too much a tool of the establishment, moreso than ever in my lifetime. I hope my book and some of the other things going on in society will break this down. Statistics such as that the United States is the number one builder of prisons and incarcerator of people in the world — people should have that in their faces every day. When the myth of the danger of drugs becomes too expensive to support, it will be abandoned and tossed away. Part of

the problem is that people are easily manipulated and led because they have no information to base any resistance on. The word “drug” has been so totally corrupted by the forces in control that you can’t even have a rational discussion with people. So if the playing field were leveled — and I think circumstances are leveling the playing field — solutions will come.