This is not a question of subjectivity alone—it is an objective and logical observation—but it is also subjective, the three terms having meaning through human representations, both collective and individual, beginning with the words that designate them—and which nevertheless also have an objective existence.

This ambivalence, where the objective and the subjective overlap, results in an initial paradox. For though in principle wilderness preceded the other two terms in time and space, in reality, the wilderness came about only once there was countryside and, later, cities. Similarly, the wilderness existed only beyond a boundary that most people did not cross—a boundary without range limit or depth, except in the imagination.

Is this paradox merely an intellectual game? The way it has been presented, the answer would seem to be yes; but in the concrete reality of the ecumene and of human history, we will see that it was indeed out of the countryside and city that the wilderness developed—this wilderness that we nevertheless believe came first.

This argues the cosmogenetic function of the countryside, then of the city: each of these

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1. A term that comes from the Greek eremos (desert, i.e., uninhabited), which gives us hermit, hermitage, and hermitism (ermite, ermitage, érémite in French). This is the wilderness, where people do not normally live, and thus it goes against the first meaning of ecumene. In the rural southwest of France, people refer to the herm, “land uncultivated and incapable of cultivation because of the nature of its soil; it is deserted and reserved for timber and bushes” (Fénelon 1970, 352). In the south, erm or ermas means “a moor, uncultivated land, a steppe of Languedoc scrubland dotted with bushes and aromatic plants among the rock, which is often the result of overgrazing by sheep” (Fénelon 1970, 263).
terms establishes a certain world (kosmos) within which the wilderness will appear as such, in a seemingly natural relationship with the other two terms. This is the perspective from which we will now reflect on the rural, the urban and the wild.

The Rural, or the First Space

I referred above to “basic patterns of landscapes in the ecumene”: the rural, the wild, and the urban. But what is a “landscape pattern”? According to the landscaper Pascal Aubry, an expert on the subject, “It is a part of the physical space that motivates us to invent a landscape” (Berque ed. 2006, 68).

He adds:

The word is well known thanks to the famous expression of the Impressionist painters, who painted outdoors (sur le motif, or “on the ground”). Words such as mot (French for “word”), motif (pattern), motivation, motion, and emotion are all from the same family. This relationship is important because it emphasizes the fact that a landscape originates in an emotion that sets in motion the one who experienced it and motivated him to invent the landscape (Berque ed. 2006, 68).

Indeed, in the human relationship with the ecumene there is a motivation that can be defined—at least as far as we, as members of an affluent society in the twenty-first century, are concerned—as a “mediation of landscape in behavior” (Berque ed. 2006, 68 et seq.); and this is indeed what is symbolized by “the triple sense of motif, a concept that is both temporal (such as “the motif of a melody”) and spatial (“the motif of a wallpaper design”), while retaining its primary meaning of ‘reason for action’” (Berque ed. 2006, 68 et seq.). These motifs of the ecumene that the rural, the wild, and the urban represent give us concrete reasons to act in one way or another, according to what they represent to us and depending how our life is arranged in space as well as in time.

Admittedly, this is no more than the evidence—the evidence of our world. In this world, life is organized between the city, the countryside and the wilderness, which for us is synonymous with vacations and which we visit more and more often. A holiday is indeed a vacancy, a parenthesis devoid of responsibilities, heir to the festival (from the German Ferien—fairs or festivals), during which we are on leave (permitted to go where we please). During these periods of release, therefore, we go towards the areas that are free of responsibilities, meaning, in effect, towards the wilderness, the opposite pole from the city, since we are city dwellers.

While the forms of this inversion are evolving rapidly, its basis is ancient. The otium of the Romans, the scholé of the Greeks, the yindun of the Chinese predate it, but it was in the hermit life of men like St. Anthony that it reached the purity of a paradigm: in such cases, it is clear that to leave the city is to leave the world for the desert, de-sertum, the wilderness where the ties—responsibilities—that weave (Latin serere, sertum) a world are undone. Ultimately, it means dying to the world: did St. Anthony not symbolically start out his life as an anchorite with a sojourn in a grave?

2. On the Desert Fathers, see Lacarrière (1975). On the idealization of the wilderness and the rejection of the city, see Berque (2010).
However, in practice this desertion of the world by the anchorites was a return (Greek *ana*) to the countryside (*chôra*): an *anachôrêsis*; and while in Syria or Thebes one could reach the desert very quickly, the essential transition was made the moment one walked through the city gates. *Anachôrêsis* was therefore an urban phenomenon. We will soon see why.

However, if we go “back” (*ana*) even further, to before the birth of cities, and even further back, to before the birth of the countryside, what do we find? The “primitive” *silva* (Latin for “wood”), habitat of the “wild” or the “savage” (which derives from *silva*). About that, what do we know? We know what anthropologists have taught us about societies that still live in such an environment today—in short, that there is nothing hermitic about this environment. This is not a desert, for the simple reason that there are no towns or countryside in relationship to which the desert as such can exist. It is not a place outside the world: it is the world of the Pygmies of Central Africa, the M’Buti of whom Maurice Godelier (1973) speaks, or the world of the Jivaro Indians of the Amazon, the Achuar whom Descola (1986) studied. For them, this world is full and orderly: it bears no resemblance to the unbounded vacancy that the desert represents for us.

Thus, initially, the wilderness does not exist because it is “out of the world” and because, for those involved, this space is precisely their world. For it to exist as wilderness, another space has to open up, and space itself has to open up: the space that gave rise to our own world. It begins with a clearing made in the forest by Neolithic shifting cultivators. Thus rurality begins. We still retain traces of this cosmogenesis: “rural” comes from an Indo-European root, *reuos*, meaning clear, which led to the Latin *rus* (countryside), *rusticus* and *ruralis*, as well as the old High German *rîum* (open space), now *Raum* (space), or the English room (same meaning) (Gransaignes d’Haute-rive 1994, 175). These words are evidence of our long memory and sources of metaphors such as the twentieth-century Heideggerian theory centered on the “clearing” (*Lichtung*) as an opening point for being and the world (Heidegger 1957).

Indeed, is from this clearing, that is, from the countryside, that our cosmicity began to unfold, in the fundamental distinction between the fields and the forest, the ecumene and the wilderness, the world and the desert.

### The City: Re-founding of the World

Thus, ever since the Neolithic era, and for thousands of years, the rural world has encroached relentlessly on the wild world, now released back into savagery. It is only recently that anthropology has rediscovered this world, and, even more recently, that we have stopped describing it as primitive. The idea has emerged that the various human worlds are of equal dignity. But it certainly comes late: not only are the sad tropics (*tristes tropiques*) of the wild world disappearing (Levi-Strauss 1955), but even that which replaced them is nearing its

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3. By this I mean non-farmers, whether they live in the forest or not. I note that this is an image that came from the French countryside. (Otherwise, we would say “savages.”)
end (Mendras 1967). For the rural world, too, has been obliterated by another one, which, in turn, has cast it back into the wilderness...

Latin students are always surprised by the Roman expression *ab urbe condita* (“since the founding of the city”). They have trouble understanding that this Year Zero of historical computation, the founding of Rome, was just as arbitrary a landmark as the birth of Christ is for us. They would be even more surprised to learn that this same principle was applied to each city’s founding, in a ritual that the Romans claimed to have inherited from the Etruscans—this *disciplina etrusca* with whom the relationship has in fact never been established with certainty (Grandazzi 1991). But history dictated that only Rome was to become an Empire, the sole center of the world, Urbs and Orbs becoming one, or at least being within hearing of the same voice. This, even today, allows the Pope to speak *urbi et orbi* (to the city of Rome and to the Catholic world).

Even though Rome alone truly became a world—the Roman world—any city, at its foundation, was a potential world in power. This is expressed in the homology of the word *mundus*, in which are found the senses of “world” and “the sacred hole that was dug in the center of a new city” and leading to a hypogeon room covered, it is believed, by a dome representing the heavens (Lagopoulos 1995, 305 et seq.).

The other urban civilizations had other rituals, but everywhere it was the city that became the center of the world, at the expense of rural areas. Thus, once again, the human worlds were re-founded. However, the cosmogenetic duo world/off-world was maintained, while moving as the urban world grew.

For millennia, the essential boundary was the one that separated the rural world from the wild world: for example, the border where the Pygmies (wild world) and the Bantu (rural world) bartered their products and which was not crossed from either side (Godelier 1973). Then another boundary appeared: for example, the furrow traced by Romulus at the founding of Rome, and which was so sacred that he killed his brother for having crossed it. To trace the furrow that circled a city was *urbare* (or *urvarē*), which means “to hold the handle-bar of the plow.” It is from that agricultural image that the urban world was born; necessarily so, since until then the world was rural.

What does this furrow mean? Symbolically, it made the city exist. To make it exist, meaning to make it stand (*sistere*) outside of (*ex*) its original setting, which is the countryside—the countryside that the Greeks called *chôra*, and from which Plato, in the *Timaeus*, would draw the onto-cosmological image of the place (*chôra*) where existence is born (*genesis*). The genesis of being, the genesis of the world, is now something that the city is going to claim—the city which in Greek is called *astu*, a word that comes from the same Indo-European root *wes-* (stay) as the Sanskrit word *vastu* (location), the English words *was, were* or the German word *Wesen* (being, essence) (Gransaignes Hauterive 1994, 240).

**Wilderness Begins outside the Walls**

The existence symbolized by the furrow or furrow would be given material form by the wall. Thus the notion of city became linked with that of the wall. As late as 1765, Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* gave this definition to “city”: “a
precinct enclosed by walls that surround multiple neighborhoods, streets, public squares, and other buildings.” And in the twenty-first century, this is the definition that the Xinhua Zidian (the Chinese counterpart of Webster’s) gives the word cheng 城:

1. Wall: the Great~ (Chang ~ 長 ~).
2. City: ~ and countryside help one another (~ xiăng huzhu 鄉互助).

As this was not enough for a city to exist, all sorts of rituals were added to this geogram to indicate that there indeed lay the boundary between world and off-world. Beyond the walls of Rome was the pomoerium (from post, “after,” and mœrus, murus, “wall”), where, symbolically, there was only wilderness: it was a sacred space where people could neither build nor cultivate. But let us look instead at the Chinese example (Berque 2010, 55 et seq.)—China being the nation of walls par excellence, with its traditional towns characterized by their systems of double walls (the cheng 城 and the guo 郭)4. The Chinese themselves have defined themselves as “the people with double walls” (chengguo zhi min 城郭之民); which, we note, disregards the rural world.

The Chinese counterpart of the pomoerium was called the jiao 郊. In Japan, during the Meiji era, this Chinese term was found in kôgai 郊外, which means “suburb” but originally meant “beyond the jiao.” The etymology of the Chinese ideogram 郊 contains the notion of bonfires (represented by the element on the left). The primary meaning of jiao refers to the terraces where, at the two solstices, the Son of Heaven made sacrifices to Heaven (south of the wall at the winter solstice) and earth (north of the wall at the summer solstice). The term was also applied, beginning with the Western Zhou (c. 1122–770 BC), to the feast of the solstice itself, on which bonfires were lit. This brings to mind, of course, our own fires of St. John, or even the lights of the shifting cultivators of the Lichtung. This points to the cosmic meaning of these spatiotemporal boundaries, which is why the passage of the jiao was marked by rituals—not least of which was, when expecting an important guest, to go to meet him in the jiao to thank him for his troubles, and when he left again, to accompany him to the limit of the jiao.

The boundary between city and non-city has indeed crystallized a world’s essential raison d’être: it is this boundary that established the distinction between nature and culture; here where the existence of the world arose. This is what made the city gates symbolic of the passage from the ecumene into the wilderness. Three thousand years after the Zhou, the turmoil generated by the decision to relocate the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales from central Paris to Aubervilliers, outside the city walls, is one striking illustration!

But in this cosmology, what was becoming of the peasant’s world? What was becoming, for example, of the Roman trilogy ager-saltus-silva (field-grazing-forest)? All of this certainly remained but found itself obliterated by a stronger duo: the world (the city) and the desert (off-world, outside the walls). Our languages still contain traces of that. Let us take the adjective derived from ager, agrestis:

4. The cheng, or internal wall, enclosed places of power (residences of princes and the nobility, administrative districts); the guo, or external wall, surrounded the rest of the city.
there is no doubt that it expresses the essence of the peasant world, the one signifying opposition to the wilderness since it comes from the Indo-European root *agr-* (agriculture). Yet, even as early as Roman times, this adjective was ambivalent: on the one hand, it meant “rural”; on the other hand it meant “wild.” Until the eighteenth century, it was the same situation in French with *agreste*. After that, the “rural” meaning prevailed. However, the ambivalence remains in both the Spanish term *agreste* and the English term *agrestic*.

This phenomenon is not unique to Europe. It is even more apparent in East Asia, where the Chinese character 野, *ye* in Mandarin, represents, on the one hand, the countryside, on the other hand, the wilderness. In Japanese, for example, *no* 野 also means “countryside”; but *yasei* 野性 means “wildness,” a state of pure nature. In Chinese, *yeren* 野人 (“man of the *ye*”) is the abominable snowman, the yeti; but *yei* 野意 means “the taste of the countryside” . . .

What does this ambivalence mean? It means that onto the initial space of the rural world—where the decisive boundary was the border between field and forest—was superimposed another space, generated by the city—where the decisive boundary became the border between the city and the countryside. In this new space, the countryside found itself thrown out of the world, to the wilderness side. It became the desert, as the wild world once was. This outing of one world by another is illustrated in the evolution of the Chinese character 野, whose ancient form was 埀, meaning land (土) covered by forest (林).

That the forest, in a cosmic shift, gave way to the fields, meaning that the wild world became the rural world—all of it, seen from the top of the wall, comes to the same *ye*: what matters is the antithesis between the city and the *pomoerium*, between world and off-world.

In other words, the city naturalized the countryside: it turned it into nature. Ever since, countryside has meant nature. The countryside (the “country,” as contrary to the city, which is on the side of culture) is the wild side, the *wilderside* of our urban world. This cosmology is expressed almost literally in a famous passage by Horace Walpole (1717–1797), an alumnus of Eton and Cambridge steeped in urbanity, in which he recommends removing the garden fence and replacing it with a trench:

. . . the garden in its turn was to be set free from its prim regularity, that it might assort with the wilder country without. . . . He [William Kent] leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden (1995 [1785]: 46).

The Floreclosure of Peasant Work

But why speak of gardens when we are addressing the relationship between city and countryside? Because the flower garden, which symbolizes nature, is an attribute of the urban vision that introduced this concept of “nature” (Berque 2010). Do we really believe that it was the pre-Socratic philosophers, the
first to give this meaning of “nature” to the word *physis*—which, in Homer, still meant the medicinal power of a plant—were laborers or shepherds? No, instead they frequented the agora of Miletus, a city where, it is said, Hippodamus invented urban planning. With respect to this link between “nature” and the city, there are also some less speculative indications, such as the fact that, when the Athenians installed the statue of the god Pan in their city to thank him for his help at Marathon, they put him in a cave—whereas in his home region, the Arcadians built him temples, as is normally done for a god (Borgeaud 1977). That is because, for Athenian urbanity, Pan had come to signify “nature,” whereas in the wilds of Arcadia he was the god of flocks, and the cave is a more “natural” habitat than a temple.

The city not only invented “nature”: it idealized it. This process is the source, in the West, of the Arcadian myth (the pastoral) and, in the Far East, of the myth of the rural hermitage. In both cases, this requires a naturalization of the rural world, meaning the foreclosure of peasant work, which is precisely what makes the countryside non-natural. The beginning signs of this sentiment can be found in Hesiod’s poem *Works and Days*. Though a farmer, Hesiod still had the feeling (verse 42) that: “The gods indeed have hidden from humans that which keeps them alive” (*Krupsantes gar echousi theoi bion anthrôpotsi*). Was not peasant work, first and foremost, what kept humans alive in those days? But sure enough, the gods hid from Hesiod that plowed land (*aroura*, same root [ara-: till] as *araire*—French for “plow”—arable or aratory), including in the Golden Age, could not bear fruit on its own.

He was thus able to write, in full contradiction, the following famous lines (verses 109–118):

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Golden was the first race [. . .]
The fruitful earth unforced bore them fruit
Abundantly and to satiety
[Chuseon men prôtista genos (. . .)]
Karpon d’phere zeidôros aroura automatê
Pollon te kai aphthonon]
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Hesiod dates this naturalness back to the Golden Age, before labor. But in the work of his heir, Virgil (*Georgics II*, circa 458–460), debarment is complete, and the earth supposedly bears its fruits without labor:

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O how fortunate are farmers if only they knew their blessings.
For them, far from the clash of arms,
The earth most just pours forth from the soil an easy sustenance.
[O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint,
Agricolas! Quibus ipsa, procul discordibus armis,
Fundit humo facilem victum justissima tellus]
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This Arcadian vision, of course, is not rural: it is urban. It is the vision of a class of people who usually live in the city, but who are wealthy owners of land outside the walls as well as in the city—people for whom the countryside is synonymous with *otium*, ease, on their vast lands, and not labor on those same lands. Leisure, not labor; contemplation, not plowing. The city is the environment where social obligations prevail; it is the negation of the *otium*—the *neg-otium* from which we get the French word *négoce* (trade or negotiation), the normal lifestyle of this “leisure class” (Veblen)—that is the world of these worldly people, who have the leisure time to enjoy that world’s rejection. They are the ones, especially
the grammarians and scholars, who are the real authors of the Arcadian myth, who, for reasons either ideological or cyclical, in the manner of a Varron, tinkered with etymologies, creating and manipulating analogies by the *convenien-tia*, the similarity, of terms to meet a program stemming from a certain conception of the agrarian economy at the end of the Republic.

The same thing, but in different terms, occurred in China with the mandarins of the Six Dynasties (third to sixth century), who, outside the walls, played at being like hermits a bit like Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess, and who gave us the myth of the landscape hermitage, counterpart of our pastoral. Luxury hermits, they saw the environment not from the perspective of *uti* (Latin “to use”—the utilitarian, which applies to the peasant world)—but as *frui*, “to derive pleasure from”—as contemplative enjoyment. It is out of this idle gaze, liberated from the ties of the urban world, that the landscape was born (*shanshui* 山水). This was said in the year 353 at the famous banquet at the Orchid Pavilion (Lanting), where a group of educated friends and hearty drinkers started composing poems (Berque 2008). As Wang Huizhi wrote:

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散懐山水 San huaishanshui
My heart being distracted by the landscape

蕭然忘轡 Xiaorun wang ji
Absent towards myself, I forgot my halter
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This *wilderside* that the countryside represented in their eyes they even took back to the city in the form of the landscaped garden. The walls of that enclosure canceled out the urbanity of the city wall, allowing them to be “in a mountain chalet in the middle of the city” (*shichû no sankyo*, 市中の山居, as the Japanese phrase has it). The Son of Heaven later borrowed it, creating for example that wonderful Garden of Perfect Clarity (the Yuanmingyuan) that thrilled Jesuits like Father Attiret—to such an extent that the abbot Laugier, in his *Essai sur l’architecture* (Essay on Architecture) (1753), saw its fabrics as real homes: “delightful homes.”

This “delightful home,” derived from the fabrics of a Chinese garden, itself derived from the fiction of the leisure class naturalizing the countryside through the foreclosure of peasant labor: this is the paradigm grafted onto the pastoral, from which were born yesterday’s suburbs and the urban sprawl of today’s countrysides.

### Urban Sprawl: Losing the Feeling of Belonging to the Cosmos

Modern suburbs, just like urban sprawl, do not arise solely from the overexpansion of the city. A certain ideal led urban crowds to want to live as if in the countryside, in a “delightful home” closer to nature. This ideal is ancient, and we have just seen what produced it, namely the naturalization of the wild world by the peasant world, followed by a naturalization of the peasant world by the urban world. But why is nature an ideal? Because, as, among a thousand other examples, Hesiod suggests it is a metaphor for the first non-distinction, before the labor done by women in childbirth, the indistinction of existence before it truly exists,

6. Social obligations, ligatures—*serta* (Latin, “wreaths, garlands”)—including the de-*sertum* of the wilderness, which saves the happy few.

7. For the influence of Chinese gardens in Europe, see Wu (2006).
in the sense of being outside. It is the state of 

*genesis* before its expulsion from the maternal *chôra* (space or receptacle). This state of non-distinction preceding the work of existence, which Hesiod called the Golden Age, was idealized by the Chinese as the *Datong* 大同, literally, “Great Same.” It would be difficult to be more explicit.

There is no end to the metaphors by which human societies, each in their own way, have expressed nostalgia for the “Great Same,” meaning nature. These metaphors are more or less material and thus unequal with respect to their effect on earth (nature in the physicist’s sense of the term). A myth found in speech, such as the pastoral, has less of a material effect than architecture expressing the same myth, such as a suburban home. As for urban sprawl—which comes from that same myth—it produces the most unsustainable ecological footprint because it wastes earth’s resources: the expanse, energy, materials, ecosystems that it hacks into pieces with its highways and chokes with its waste. In other words, in what has become our urbanity, the quest for “nature” destroys nature.

Environmentally unsustainable, urban sprawl is also morally unsustainable in that it is accompanied by growing inequality. Wasting earth’s resources means socially, in effect, that the “selective nomads,” as they are called by structural geography (Desmarais and Ritchot 2001), those who have the leisure to live where they wish, leave only crumbs from their feast for the “forced nomads,” those who are reduced to living where they can.

Urban sprawl is also aesthetically untenable: it devastates the very thing that draws the city outside the walls: the landscape. It does what an eighth-century Chinese poet, Li Shangyin, called *shafenjing* 殺風景: “killing the landscape.” It does so not only because it lays concrete, produces pollution and causes things to rot everywhere—“artificializing” nature, in short—but also because it has abolished forever what the gates of the city once symbolized: the existence of a world. This cosmogenetic limit has turned it into what is now called “city entrances.”

“City entrances,” these unspeakable areas extending along suburban roads, are not just the bane of landscapers: they are the symbol of the end of the urban world. But urban sprawl, which comes after that, cannot become a world in turn, as the countryside had done with respect to the forest, and the city had then done with respect to the countryside. This is not only because sprawl is not environmentally sustainable, but also because it no longer has any boundaries that could establish it as such. It is the same motorized mob which mills about everywhere; there, its habitat, the urban sprawl, is acosmic not only because it is unsustainable, but because it cannot have any *genesis* out of anything. It cannot ex-ist.

This means that we must tackle the problem at the source: from the earth . . .
Abstract

In many languages, the words that refer to rurality are the same words used to describe wildness: ye in Chinese, agreste in Spanish, and so on. Yet ever since the Neolithic clearings, the countryside has been defined in opposition to the forest. The rural/wild equation indicates that the opposition was later superseded by another opposition defined by a specific vision originating from the city. In historic civilizations, this is the second opposition—between city and country—that has become the key structuring opposition, to such an extent that in the urban vision nature and countryside have tended to overlap. The new entity (nature-countryside) eventually came to be idealized by crowds in the modern metropolis in search of a lost nature. In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, this longing for nature resulted in the phenomenon of “diffuse urbanity” in rich countries, where a predominantly urban society now populates rural areas. This paper examines the foundations of this “nature,” which represents the extreme of artificiality.

Keywords

cosmicity, space, rural, wild, urban