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Anarchy Against Civilization!

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Far too many times, we as anarchists can get locked into ideology and blueprint making rather than thinking critically and acting to meet current challenges. The idea of challenging capitalism and the state was one that was relatively new to western civilization when the first people to be called anarchists in a political sense first put forth their ideas. We should not be satisfied to stop there. They didn't face issues such as climate change, neo-liberal globalization, or peak production. That doesn't mean we can afford to ignore those issues. Most early anarchists didn't challenge extraction, economics, technology, domestication, agriculture, mass society, or civilization but that should not bar us from doing so.

What is civilization?

Civilization can be defined as a way of life based around growing urbanization and the social relationships that result. Urban areas, also known as cities, are defined as populations so dense as to require the importation of the means to sustain the city itself and its population.

Upon an initial landbase, a city is built, including houses, businesses, government buildings, infrastructure, etc. This gives people a place to live, but not the means. Because of this, the civilization must seek out external landbases to exploit in order to harvest the resources to keep it going, to build and maintain houses, bridges, roads, sewer lines, water lines, electrical lines, public transportation, food for restaurants, clothing for the stores, luxury items for the civilized, personal transportation, entertainment, and so on ad infinitum.

Eventually, as cities grow and populations increase and the civilization requires more and more external land to provide the civilized with goods, the civilization will run into land with people on it, usually people whose way of life depends on that land. When the civilized encounter such people, they usually have the option (if they aren't killed outright) of working highly exploitative jobs to provide goods or services for the civilized on their traditional lands, moving to the cities to find work, or fighting back.

Because most civilized people do not grow their own food or make their own clothing or build their own houses, access their own water . . . because the civilized pass these responsibilities on to others, some kind of exchange must take place. As the demands of civilization increase, more and more land is needed to produce goods and services for the civilized. Eventually this means that the civilized will run into traditional communities or other civilizations sitting on top of the land they wish to exploit . . .

Civilization always views the natural world as "natural resources."

War

Organized warfare and systemic violence are hallmarks of civilization. Without violence as a form of social control at home and conquest abroad, the hierarchy necessary for the maintenance of mass society could not be maintained. When comparing hunter-gatherers to their agrarian or civilized neighbors, we find that while hunter-gatherers show little or no sexual division of labor, the agrarians and the civilized and those engaged in domestication are more likely to be highly warlike and patriarchal. The tendency seems to be that with increased complexity and increased domestication and planting come increases in the amount of organized violence, hierarchy, and dominance.

The wars and occupations in which the United States are engaged today are not an anomaly. They are the natural extension of a war that began long ago, even before the Christ Bearer Colonizer plagued the Arawaks, even before civilization touched Europe. . . the war waged against the wild and the primitive by the civilized and the domesticated.

Digging to the Root

As radicals (from the latin *radix-root*) we seek to examine and challenge root causes. The anarchist tradition has historically identified capitalism as a root cause. Fortunately, we as anarchists are not bound to tradition. Certainly capitalism is odious and something to be abolished, but it is not a root problem. Capitalism is rooted in civilization. Social stratification and hierarchy are necessary for the operation and maintenance of mass society. There is no way to take all of the tasks necessary to maintain civilization and equalize them and divide them up among people equally. Because of its complexity, civilization requires specialization and hierarchy.

Anarchy can't simply pick a set of tenants and require adherence regardless of new information. As we challenge institutions and break them down further and further, we will likely need to challenge some things that our fore bearers might not have. This doesn't imply a break from anarchy, but rather a break from doctrine and ideology.

Long before capitalism, civilization was destroying the natural world, ecosystems, and species and it was dispossessing communities of their landbases. By what standard do we say that capitalism is a root cause? We see that hierarchy and dominance came out of the neolithic revolution and that much of the middle east was deforested by the first civilization. Where was capitalism in all of this? Can capitalism be blamed for the slavery that built the pyramids at Giza? The

Roman Empire? Certainly we see authority and civilization wreaked havoc on humanity long before capitalism was in the picture. Capitalism is just another manifestation of civilization. It is not a root cause.

Why is it that we as anarchists are so timid to ask new questions and tread upon new ground? Why are economics, civilization, technology, domestication, mass society, and extraction sacrosanct?

Sustainability

Left anarchists and so called green capitalists and eco-socialists have begun using the words “sustainable” or “sustainability” extremely loosely. Living sustainably means living in symbiosis with the earth and its inhabitants. For something to be sustainable means that it must be able to be continued at the same rate indefinitely. In other words, sustainability means an end to extraction and the use of non-renewable “resources.” To refer to something that is *less* exploitative as “sustainable” is simply dishonest.

No civilization has ever been sustainable.

Personal Consumer Choices and Alternative Energy

One of the popular myths is that personal consumer choices can move us towards sustainability. Before buying in, we should be asking ourselves who benefits from this. While I wouldn't say there is anything “bad” about trying to make consumer choices that are less exploitative or less cruel (if that is possible) we need to understand that this only mildly alters the details of the existing system without challenging the paradigm itself. Alternative energies are similar in that they attempt to operate only within the context of industrial society and extraction culture. They simply seek to alter details, not to facilitate a paradigm shift.

Who Should Pay for Your Toys? Civilization as Irresponsibility

If someone wants a computer then naturally it should come from their land-base. This person finds some people who want to make computers. It is already irresponsible to take from the earth more than one can return, but we will say

that this group or community has decided that they want computers and machine production more than they want a healthy landbase. They begin mining for the metals required for the task. Of course we also need more than metals. We need petroleum and large amounts of water. So the group manufacturing the computers is mining their landbase, drilling for oil, and using water far exceeding the amount available to them in their area and the water used in the production becomes polluted. . .

Where does the pollution go? Who absorbs the costs? Who is responsible for growing food for the people who use their landbase to produce computers? What landbase will be used for producing the machines that will produce computers? Who will work with the hazardous materials? Who produces the hazardous material gear they will wear while making these computers? Where does all the excess water needed for production come from? On whose landbase/food source do we put the factories? Where do the pollutants from the factories go? What happens when you can't push the costs of your lifestyle onto someone else? What happens when you have to pay for your own toys?

Traditional Communities

Something that I rarely hear discussed in left/progressive circles is the issue of indigenous claim to land. A leftist civilization would be no different than any other civilization in that it would require the same extraction, production, and consumption process, meaning constant growth and expansion. I am highly disinclined to believe that *this time* the civilized would not dispossess traditional communities of their land to turn it into commodities for consumption by the civilized.

Why should indigenous voices not be the first heard after the fall of civilization? Why do we presume a eurocentric model, based upon the dominant culture rather than developing a way of life more similar to that of the original human inhabitants of the land, those who know it best?

Face to Face Society

Anarchy, statelessness, freedom, a world without authority, has long been the goal of anarchists. Not all anarchists ideas, however, result in anarchy. When following anarchist ideas to their natural conclusion, we find that the structures necessary to coordinate and maintain civilization and mass society are necessarily

authoritarian and stratified. Once face to face accountability is lost, personal power and personal responsibility are abdicated.

Civilization is Authority

Civilization and complex society, necessarily result in social stratification or hierarchy. To adequately fulfill all the functions needed to maintain civilization and mass society authority and submission, division of labor, specialization, etc emerge.

Primitive anarchists are not simply positing that “our way is better” but pointing to a mountain of evidence that shows that stateless, egalitarian societies have existed for thousands of years and still exist today in the form of hunter-gatherer tribes and bands, and that to date there has never been a long term, sustained stateless, egalitarian civilization. This is no coincidence.

Can there be a long term, industrial, egalitarian, stateless mass society? If history is any indicator the answer is “no.” The burden of proof is certainly upon the claimant. Mass society is so complex and requires so many moving parts and particular duties that specialization and division of labor arise not out of preference or choice but out of their necessity to mass society.

Primitivist anarchists can point to most of human existence prior to 10,000 years ago and hunter-gatherers today such as the Mbuti, the San, or Aboriginal Australians¹ as proof of hunter-gatherers creating sustained, stateless, egalitarian social arrangements. This is, of course, not to idealize or objectify any of these people in any way. No social network or social arrangement is ever perfect or without fault or flaw. However, this does not mean that some methods can’t be better than others. As primitivist anarchists, we believe that the social arrangements of hunter-gatherers are overall preferable to those of civilization.

Determinism

It is erroneous to assume that everything that exists now was an inevitability. In fact, it’s much more accurate to consider all things that are now to be the result of many improbabilities. The times in which we live are not the result of a predetermined, single narrative. They are a conglomeration of actions, deliberate and non-deliberate. They result from choices, coercion, coincidence.

¹ Retraction: After publishing this I discovered that the Australian Aborigines have a very sexist feeding hierarchy and therefore should not be described as “egalitarian.”

For example, your existence was not inevitable, but the result of a series of improbable events, that caused your grandparents to meet, and then your parents, that particular egg, that particular sperm . . . In the same way, all that exists now is the sum of a series of highly improbably events. The present was not inevitable and the future is unwritten.

The Fall of Civilization

We are in an unprecedented era. Neo-liberalism has created a global economy, a global civilization. History tells us that when civilizations fall, the result is usually a return to more decentralized ways of living. There is no reason to believe this is not a likely outcome of the fall of global civilization as well.

Breaking with civilization, economics, and domestication has nothing to do with “going backwards” or “turning back the clock.” Correcting mistakes is not a matter of reversing a preset trajectory. Civilization is constantly and rapidly destroying species, ecosystems, communities, and people. Whether it crashes on its own or whether we take responsibility and bring it down ourselves, the sooner civilization comes down, the less devastation there will be when it does.

If anarchy is to be relevant in today’s world it must be green, that is, it must be focused on bringing down civilization and finding a way of living in which we acknowledge ourselves as a part of the natural world, rather than a force at odds with it.

Fighting For Anarchy,
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