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Why I am not an Anti-Primitivist

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Iatrogenesis

This fancy word refers to inadvertent or adverse effects or complications caused by, or resulting from, medical treatment or advice; it would appear to be in a different category from negligence. “Brought about by a healer” is the literal translation from the Greek

Anarcho-Primitivism

A school of anarchist thought emphasizing the inherently authoritarian and alienating aspects of civilization. The best anarcho-primitivists “see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy” (John Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*), while the worst reject class analysis, blaming all humans for the exploitation, domination, and destruction carried out by members of the global ruling elites.

Allopathy

A term coined by the Samuel Hahnemann (founder of Homeopathy), it is not the term that its practitioners prefer for themselves; being expansionist and authoritarian, they refer to themselves as regular or real medical doctors, while every other healer is a quack. I use it descriptively to refer to physicians who almost exclusively treat symptoms rather than causes, and who rely primarily on pharmaceutical and surgical interventions rather than prevention.

realm. We can dispute their strategies and tactics, and we should challenge their particular assumptions and analyses — as we should with all radicals, ourselves included — but to do so in good faith requires taking them seriously on their own terms, something virtually all vocal anti-primitivists have shown themselves incapable of doing.

Glossary

Civilization

Definitions and characteristics vary depending on the speaker/writer and what her agenda is. For the purposes of this essay I prefer to define it generically as referring to a condition where people live in cities and have particular cultural traits integrating them with, and separating them from, the inhabitants of surrounding rural areas; populations of cities are also (sub)culturally integrated and separated from others sharing the same urban landscape. This definition does not begin to encompass what is right — and wrong — with urban existence. We'll leave the nitpicking over specific characteristics to another time and context.

Division of Labor

A regime where productive tasks are dissected to such a degree that no one person has the ability or opportunity to perform all of them; further, the knowledge and expertise required to transcend the division of labor is either compartmentalized, or withheld, or both. Specialization of tasks, which involves knowledge, expertise, and competence, is different from how sociologists understand division of labor. People can learn to specialize without becoming hierarchs, while divisions of labor reinforce and extend hierarchies and class distinctions.

Introduction

There has never been a civilization that has lasted more than several centuries. It is reasonable to assume that the one we are forced to inhabit (Western, Euro-American, Capitalist, Post-Industrial, whatever you want to call it . . .) will also someday fall apart. Identified and critiqued by anarchists for over 150 years, the disparities between rich and poor and between order-givers and order-takers are increasingly obvious and obnoxious; mainstream public discourse is often gleefully polarized, permeated with facile dehumanization of chosen enemies; so-called culture wars continue apace; the devastating burdens imposed on the natural world and indigenous people (including the semi-permanently displaced) by the extraction of resources¹ and the expansion and development of productive forces continues unabated. The end of this civilization may have the characteristics of some apocalyptic and bellicose horror show, similar to what some call The Collapse, fodder for much American popular culture over the past decade. Alternatively, it could look like a slow erosion of technological dependence with an accompanying reversion to a simpler, decentralized, and rural-centric culture, with people using up industrial gadgets and tinkering with them for as long as there's material to tinker with. It might even be the result of a self-managed restructuring of urbanism, in line with the histrionics concerning Revolutionary Barcelona (July 1936- April 1937). All anarchists agree, however, that the current organization of this civilization is untenable.

The Fear of Anarchism

Objections to the ideas and visions of various schools of anarchism come from all directions. Anarchists tend to pay most attention to the ones coming from Liberals and Leftists, those who see themselves as supposedly working for the same goals as anarchists — or if *not exactly*

¹ The idea that water, soil, mineral deposits, forests, animals, and natives are considered resources (able to be extracted/used/exploited/destroyed) doesn't seem to bother most pro-civilization anarchists.

the same, then at least for something they call Social Justice (objections of conservatives, reactionaries, racists, populists, and fascists derive from their devotion to social hierarchies, the State, and the Leadership Principle, and are therefore uninteresting).² One of their many objections to anarchist revolution is that thousands, if not millions, will die, whether through violent and vengeful acts of class revenge or due to the propensity of The Masses to be barbaric psychopaths. According to various statist ideologues, the only barrier to a constant situation of rapine, murder, and widespread looting is a strong state with its authoritarian agents to keep this volatile and chaotic rabble in check. Surely there's some irony to the left-anarchist objection to an anti-civilization perspective that primarily relies on the same argument.³

The paranoia of the bourgeois liberal is that the rabble will target him directly and personally for abuse, assault, and/or murder — a possibly justifiable sentiment since those who own property, exploit laborers, and generally push people around will be the most likely victims of the various kinds of revenge devised and executed by an insurgent working class. The other concern is that their property and wealth will be expropriated without compensation, the typical result of authentic proletarian

² In the last decade there's been a conscious tendency among some on the Right to adopt the style and rhetoric of anti-globalization and anti-imperialism, but this shouldn't fool anyone. Any similarities to aspects of Leftism or anarchism are purely rhetorical; that such right-wing formations and their discourse isn't dismissed and/or ridiculed out of hand, while obnoxious, is perhaps understandable in this postmodern era of style trumping substance. Add the confusion and general incoherence that permeates the Left and the resulting inability to distinguish their own rhetoric from the not-so-hidden agendas of those on the Right easily clouds the discourse, allowing the reactionaries to flourish because of the actual similarities between their respective authoritarian schemes. Too many anarchists, confused by their attachment to Leftist assumptions, fall for it as well.

³ It is only ironic, however, if we take these anarchists at their word that they are actually interested in fomenting an anarchist (that is, genuinely anti-hierarchical, anti-statist, and anti-capitalist) revolution, one in/after which nobody would — or could — be pressured or compelled to engage in any activity that is not voluntary. Most of the schemes put forward by left anarchists sound more or less like self-managed versions of what exists today, just with more meetings; the rhetoric of "building the new inside the shell of the old" neatly avoids the question of precisely describing what it is, besides the nomenclature, they find objectionable about "the old."

not blueprints) about how roads, sewers, (inter)continental transport, fiber optics, and other accoutrements of modern industrialism can be sustained without threats, coercion, guilt-mongering, and the more banal pressure to conform.²² At some point a balance needs to be found between the general well-being of any human(e) culture and the specific demands of urban existence. A friend once remarked to me in the course of such a speculative discussion that if it came down to a choice between freedom and telephones, he knows which he'd pick.

Why I am Not an Anti-Primitivist

I am on record as being critical, but cautiously supportive, of anarcho-primitivism.²³ Despite my uneasiness and skepticism about many aspects of anarcho-primitivism, I cannot consider myself an anti-primitivist. So far, anti-primitivists have relied almost exclusively on the use of smears, innuendo, and misrepresentations to try to score rhetorical points. Refusing to accept what anarcho-primitivists say about themselves, anti-primitivists rely on frantic denunciations rooted in insupportable caricature.²⁴

Challenging the assumptions of mass society and industrialism are among the most important analytical contributions anarcho-primitivists have made to anarchist theory, reminding us of what is possible to reclaim about human culture and history. Some may yearn for a widespread return to gathering and hunting, and some may be inspired by a deep-seated misanthropy, but their commitment to the abolition of the state, capitalism, and domination places them firmly within the anarchist

²² See my essay "Why Primitivism (Without Adjectives) Makes Me Nervous" in *AJODA* # 52.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anti-primitivists are not the only anarchists who use such tactics against their perceived rivals, nor are anarcho-primitivists their only targets. Post-lefties, CrimethInckers, insurrectionists, animal/earth liberationists. . . any anarchist who doesn't fit whatever parameters the champions and guardians of Left Anarchism find compelling is asking for the same kind of trouble.

out access to clean water and adequate food; this nasty situation can be squarely blamed on the profit-obsessed decisions of capitalists, with their rapacious appetite for privatizing natural resources, and the enforcement of those divisions through deadly conflict on the economic front as well as on the battlefield. As many critics have tirelessly pointed out, the question is not underproduction but unequal distribution. The sad truth, however, is that abolishing capitalism won't automatically allow those who are now suffering to regain access to those resources. And, however unfortunate it may be to admit, an anarchist revolution won't necessarily help them either. Abolishing the imposed regime of dispossession is a good start, but without an accompanying desire and willingness on the part of those who suffer to alter their situations and relationships themselves, we are back to the problem that faces anarchists and any other authentic revolutionaries — namely, the apparent resignation and apathy of those who suffer the most from the domination of capital and commerce.

Agricultural work would probably require more than the fabled three to five hours a week if peasants and farmers are expected to feed the entirety of the world's population. If there are to be large urban centers ATR, then there will need to be large nearby areas devoted to farming in order to feed those in the cities. And that's leaving aside the entire question of a remedy to landlessness: how many newly liberated peasants and farmers would return to the areas from which they'd been exiled and dispossessed and continue producing large-scale monoculture crops for export to the cities? Shouldn't we expect — as has been the case throughout modern history — that they would reclaim and self-organize their fields with local/regional subsistence as a priority? What is the anarcho-syndicalist program regarding the redistribution of land, and how do they plan to feed six billion people while respecting, supporting, and protecting the autonomy of those who wish to grow food? During any transition to a revolutionary urbanism, would there be sufficient reserves to feed six billion people? It is doubtful that even the most perfect anarcho-syndicalist scenario can make the feeding of six billion any easier.

The challenge for those anarchists wedded to the idea of maintaining and/or extending an urbanized society is to provide a few hints (certainly

revolution. A long-standing bourgeois conceit is the identification of themselves as a class (and all their supposedly positive qualities such as temperance, modesty, honesty, morality, *ad nauseum*) with the totality of society. Their paranoia relative to any hint of revolution can be stated in a cretinous inversion of the Wobbly slogan: “An Injury to One Self-Interested, Enlightened, Economically Powerful Property Owner is an Injury to All.”

The paranoia of Leftists is that their useless — if not counter-revolutionary — social function in any insurrectionary or revolutionary situation (let alone during and after a decisive and definitive rupture with capitalism) will be exposed. The inevitable result being that the rabble will quickly ignore, ridicule, or otherwise dispense with the Leftists' benevolent guidance and progressively enlightened governance, if not them personally as incipient bosses and exploiters. Such a concern has been explicitly articulated since at least the time of the Great French Revolution, where the Jacobins consistently expressed their fear and loathing of the *canaille*. A characterization — or better, caricature — of gangs of uncontrollables wanting nothing better than to destroy property and harm people (non-human animals hadn't been [re]invented in Europe yet) runs throughout the anti-anarchist socialism of the Marxist and non-Marxist alike.

The Fear of Anarcho-Primitivism

Anarchists who are dismissive of or hostile to anarcho-primitivist or anti-civilization discussions try to shut down any discussion with the assertion that “millions will die” or that these perspectives “promote genocide.”⁴ If we take these statements as seriously as they warrant (which is not very much), we need to respond with a pertinent question: Who, precisely, are these anonymous millions who are supposedly going to die either immediately, or very soon, once there's no more electricity?

⁴ Anarchists who have written about the supposed mass die-off include Andrew Flood (discussed below), Chaz Bufe, Brian Oliver Sheppard, Iain McKay, and — when he was still pretending to be an anarchist — Murray Bookchin. Anarchist fellow traveler commentators on the subject include Noam Chomsky.

Will thousands of city dwellers starve without the trains and trucks that transport food from the countryside and maritime ports to the shelves of their local supermarkets? Once the sewers start backing up, and without adequate access to clean water, will they die from cholera and typhus? Won't that happen if revolutionaries are successful in carving out an initial enclave, some kind of anarchist city/region? Won't the capitalists try to starve us out? Won't the global ruling class try to destroy our urban infrastructure the same way they have done to their non-revolutionary enemies in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, Chechnya . . . ?

Thousands Die Iatrogenically

Adequate medical care has been a constant concern of anti-primitivists. They have decided that a desire to scale back the intrusion of industrial medicine equals sentencing thousands — if not millions — of people to death, either from lack of any medical care, from starvation, or both. In terms of the medical issue, who are the people whose lives would be in jeopardy in an anarcho-primitivist future? People in renal failure without access to dialysis?⁵ People who have to be fed through gastric tubes? People who can't breathe without being attached to ventilators? Those who are dependent on other interventionist medical procedures like organ transplants? What about the nearly two-hundred thousand who die annually through misdiagnosis, incorrect drug therapy; through negligence or by accident in hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, skilled nursing homes (etc); from botched operations and/or exposure to contagious pathogens?⁶ Is there really no decent anarchist critique of the pharmaceutical-industrial complex, with its reliance on LD-50 protocols,

⁵ The U.S. Renal Data System's 2004 annual report cited over one million dialysis patients worldwide, with an estimated 250,000 deaths per year in the US alone.

⁶ According to S. Starfield's essay "Is US health really the best in the world?" published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* 284: 483–85 (2000), adverse drug "events" account for 106,000 deaths per year; medical errors in hospitals account for 20,000; unnecessary surgeries account for 12,000; and medication errors account for 7000.

wealth and production is tedious as well as dangerous. Federated and self-managed methods of mining won't make it any less so. And even if such labor that is a prerequisite for city life were less dangerous and tedious, how many people would choose to perform it for three to five hours a week?

Let's speculate that anywhere below 50% of those currently employed as miners decided that, apart from really enjoying the tasks, they wanted to become heroes of the revolution by exceeding their weekly quota of onerous labor in mines. Would that be sufficient to sustain the infrastructure of global industrialism? Sewage treatment/disposal is a necessity of urban existence. How many committed urbanites will volunteer for more than their three to five hours a week doing water reclamation? The various tasks required to maintain city life in a way that wouldn't mean a return to the kind of squalor that typify the medieval era are no less onerous for being self-managed. Certainly there will always be people who are willing to do more than what might be considered their fair share of drudgery, but will it be sufficient to support six billion people? Even a sustainable self-managed urban existence would require a radical restructuring of the necessary infrastructure. Any urbanism not based on a human-scale set of relationships (productive, distributive, maintenance, innovative) would most likely reproduce — and probably very quickly — the kinds of divisions of labor and mechanizations associated with modern class-based metropolitan living. Questioning the foundations and pillars of mass class society (division of labor, reliance on machines, dependence on polluting fuels) is rarely part of any anti-primitivist discussion.²¹ What's to keep people from abandoning urban centers?

Can Any Anarchist Feed Six Billion People?

Industrial civilization hasn't done a very good job of helping to keep alive the tens of thousands in the un(der)developed world currently with-

²¹ Despite being fiction, LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* is a brilliant rumination on an explicitly anarchist society plagued by conformity, bureaucracy, guilt, and other unsavory aspects of an officially anti-hierarchical culture.

to remain skeptical of the alleged benefits and indispensability of every sort of organization (mass or otherwise) to achieving the goals of an anarchist revolution. But skepticism and critique are beside the ideological point for fans of mass organization. Just like the “mass die-off” mantra, the mass organization mantra has the force of dogma, a True Belief; its appeal resides in the power of endless repetition.

Flood’s three assertions rely on the exact opposite of critical thinking and a dispassionate examination of the historical data. Such ideological limitations make for good rants, but wishful thinking elevated into a blinkered political position and organizational goal just doesn’t cut it as a decent anarchist strategy.

Work After the Revolution

For the sake of argument, let’s say that there has been a global anarchist revolution that has definitively abolished all states and all relations based on capitalism. There are no more cops or bosses, and everyone in the world is free to create/organize/maintain the necessary means for their own survival in federated communes where all the vagaries of decision making are smoothed out, and near-consensus is the norm. It’s now officially After The Revolution.

In the absence of a coercive apparatus connected to the rule of capitalism, how many people will voluntarily spend time performing onerous tasks that are necessary for the maintenance of mass-based city life? The extraction of metal ores, chemicals, coal, and other current sources of

definitive abolition of either the state or capitalism (although it can be argued that the Makhnovists were able to go farther in that direction than the *cenetistas*), no matter how hard the anarchist militants tried — and clearly many tried as hard as they could. In both examples the anarchists faced similar problems. The major internal obstacle was an incomplete and/ or incoherent analysis of both the state and capitalism, which inevitably led to many strategic mistakes. The major external obstacle for each was the constraint of imperialist war plus their numerically and militarily stronger enemies on the Left and the Right — the anarchists had to fight both at the same time. The lesson of Makhno’s defeat was to suggest the cadre-based Organizational Platform as a corrective, while ten years later in Spain, the mass organization helped to bury the very revolution they said they were supporting.

animal experimentation, a plethora of injurious or deadly so-called side effects and other unintended results?

It is implied by anti-primitivist anarchists that infections (acne *and* sepsis?) are inevitably and invariably fatal — an annoyingly typical canard.⁷ Those who make this allegation have no understanding of healing techniques among non-civilized humans or the continual use of plant medicines by rural and urban dwellers, not to mention the documented 4000 year-old history of Traditional Asian Medicine. Studies of ethnobotanists and anthropologists overflow with examples of the long-standing use of plant medicines to treat everything from headaches and insomnia to hemorrhages and, yes, infections. Archaeologists have found skeletal remains of early humans who’ve clearly been seriously injured and who survived for years after.

Anti-primitivists who fear life-threatening medical issues also have no comprehension of the history and practice of allopathy — mislabeled Western Medicine by those who share the assumptions of Euro-American colonialism. Aside from being a relatively recent innovation, allopathy as a healing modality derives many of its successes specifically from military medicine, especially in trauma care. Allopaths tend to be authoritarian, basing their ameliorative treatments on perhaps the strictest division of labor of modern civilization, that between healer and patient. Allopathy is expansionist; its practitioners and protectors continually strive to supplant and/or suppress all other healing modalities. And it is infantilizing; patients are removed from the knowledge and ability to

⁷ We are assured by medical maven Chaz Bufe in his moralistic masterpiece *Listen, Anarchist!* that, “It’d be extremely difficult, for example, to make a case that we’d be better off without antibiotics . . . Returning to the preindustrial technological level of 500 years ago would not only eliminate the ‘means’ of combatting disease . . . Most children would die from disease before adulthood.” This is not the only unsubstantiated claim in Bufe’s screed, but it is among the most (unintentionally) hilarious; “most” children did not die 500, or even 1000, years ago; if they had, the world’s population would be substantially smaller. There are paeans to antibiotics and other medical in(ter)ventions scattered throughout the works of other anti-primitivists. Never mind that the overuse of antibiotics in the meat and dairy industries has contaminated local food and water supplies, never mind that the misuse of antibiotics in humans has resulted in the creation/adaptation of Super Bugs, strains of bacteria that have evolved resistance to every successive antibiotic that’s thrown at them.

decide upon the course of their own treatments. Allopaths are certainly successful; thousands of their patients are healed, and lives are extended. But is the quantity of those extra years, months, and days in various kinds of debilitating treatments (like chemotherapy or dialysis among others) comparable to the quality of an unalienated, unmediated life – however short(er)?⁸ Health concerns seem paramount to most anti-primitivist anarchists, yet there also seems to be no concurrent analysis of the mainstream medical establishment and its inherent and attendant institutions of social control.⁹

By way of contrast, Native American, African, Asian (Traditional and non-traditional), and European herbal healing has a much longer tradition, and is based on empirical progress through trial and error of both practitioners and those with ailments.¹⁰ Probably beginning with observing other animals in their environs, humans have had an extensive plant-based pharmacopeia for almost as long as we have been around as an identifiable species – and some paleo-anthropologists argue that the use of medicinal foods, like the use of fire, has been an integral part of hominid *prehistory*.

⁸ For an explicitly radical examination of this topic, see N’Dréa: **One Woman’s Fight to Die Her Own Way** by Andréa Dorea (Eberhardt Press, 2008) in which she can take allopathic institutions and their treatments only so long before reclaiming control over her own healing.

⁹ The tendency to medicalize and psychiatrize social deviance is another huge problem with mainstream Euro-American medicine. “Science,” argued Foucault, “became the means by which the state has increasingly gained power over our bodies, by becoming the official arbiter of what may be considered ‘normal’ [healthy] and ‘abnormal [diseased].’ The more narrowly science defines what is normal, the more the state controls us. Being diagnosed as abnormal . . . *dictates a social reaction and intervention.*” (Jonathan Marks, **Why I am Not a Scientist: Anthropology and Modern Knowledge**, UC Press 2009, p.69, my emphasis) Unfortunately I began reading this amazing book too late for a fuller incorporation of Marks’s analysis into my essay.

¹⁰ One or two deaths within a decade from a plant-based supplement or treatment is sufficient for the FDA to ban herbal medicines (compare footnote six above). The corruption of the FDA (dis)approval process is clear enough, with the pharmaceutical industry bankrolling research, and a revolving door between people working in government and private industry (cabinet-level bureaucrats in the executive branch have an analogous system with defense/intelligence/security contractors). Billions of dollars in profit are at stake, and patents on plants are still not easy to get.

interconnectedness of various beneficial technologies with less-than-beneficial effects completely escapes those who adhere to this simplistic position. The intertwined and expansionist aspects of modern technology are part of the condition of domination and exploitation that we are forced to endure; the dream of the technocrat is that there be no escape for the rest of us. What alternatives exist for those of us whose desires include not wanting to be so intimately connected to various kinds of technology?

“The problem is that primitivists like to attack the very methods of mass organization that are necessary for overthrowing capitalism,” is the last of Flood’s claims that I’ll deal with. Countering this assertion has nothing to do with primitivism; I hereby claim that attack on behalf of post-left anarchists.¹⁹ The organizational questions for anarchists have always been, and remain: what kind? for what purpose? with whom? Flood’s assertion is, once again, not based on any sort of critical examination, this time of actual and specific radical/anarchist history. The main attack on his assertion is historical: so far, there’s never been a successful overthrowing of capitalism, so there’s no way to test the validity or accuracy of his opinion. We simply don’t know whether mass anarchist organizations will be a help, a hindrance, or completely irrelevant to a definitive overthrowing of capitalism. We have no examples to cite.²⁰ At the very least it behooves honest and thoughtful anarchists

¹⁸ “[F]ew adhere to the neutrality of technology thesis.” Tyler Veak, writing in the famous anarcho-primitivist [sic!] journal *Science, Technology and Human Values: Journal of the Social Studies of Science* (25.2, 2000), published through the auspices of that bastion of anti-Enlightenment thought, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

¹⁹ The rejection of mass organizations is one of the core issues that has prompted what can be loosely labeled post-left anarchist discourse. That there are overlaps and similarities among anarcho-primitivist and post-left anarchist discourse is undeniable, but they remain distinct tendencies. The editors of this journal have taken it upon ourselves to be among the primary theoreticians and commentators of this tendency that aims to reclaim some neglected aspects of traditional anarchism while embracing some of the more recent relevant insights of – among others – post-structuralists, radical feminists, and the Situationists and other Left critics of Marxism and Party Communism.

²⁰ The usual examples of actually existing anarchy (parts of the Ukraine, 1918–21 and parts of Spain, 1936–37) are not actually applicable. Not because they were not successful, but because for as long as anarchists were supposed to have been in charge, there was no

a lower population density and saying that those who acknowledge it are the ones who are going to set up a genocidal system whereby the population gets culled (à la Pol Pot, the famous anarcho-primitivist[?]) often cited by anti-primitivists). The problem for anti-primitivists is that they only ever interpret an acknowledgment as meaning that anarcho-primitivists want millions to die so that their utopia can be realized. No anarcho-primitivist I know of has suggested doing that; insisting that they do necessitates creating a strawman. Ignoring and denying the subjectivity of others is an old authoritarian trick, and is therefore especially unfortunate when used by anarchists.

The imputation that any and all primitivists and/or anti-civvers are promoters of genocide is absurd on its face. The statement “millions will die” is an empty slogan, taken on faith — as if its continuous repetition by so many different anti-primitivists makes it that much more credible. It is nothing but a knee-jerk position against which it is impossible to argue; indeed it is invoked and repeated precisely in order to shut down any possibility of discussion. “Millions will die” is not an argument or even a simple opinion, because there’s no way to counter or challenge it. It is a non-factual assertion, held and promoted as dogma. Any and all dogmas are decidedly unattractive for any self-described anarchist to cling to.

Flood states further on that “primitivism is no substitute for the anarchist struggle for liberation, which involves adopting technology to our needs rather than rejecting it.” This even less substantiated assertion leaves no room for a reassessment of what sorts of technology are (or might be) appropriate for a self-managed culture. At a time when industrialism, and what can be understood as modern technology, started to make inroads in the economic field (the period roughly between the Paris Commune and the Spanish Revolution), such a statement coming from anarchists might have sounded forward-looking and exciting, but at the beginning of the 21st century such an assertion sounds hopelessly naïve. Flood’s use of *technology* throughout his oeuvre is divorced from any sort of critical appraisal; it belongs to the discredited and discarded idea that technology is some kind of neutral system that arises out of good intentions and unseen economic forces.¹⁸ The complication of the

Thousands Die Industrially

Thousands die or are injured each year from workplace accidents in the developed capitalist world.¹¹ Self-managing safety procedures and health guidelines might make workplaces less onerous places to spend time, but it can’t eliminate the dangers inherent in them. It is also important to mention that many of the workplace safety improvements that have occurred in the US over the past half-century are for the most part the results of actions initiated and carried out through OSHA and other bureaucracies as well as numerous lawsuits against owners. In effect the judicial arm of government is used to combat the anti-proletarian excesses of the economic elite, hardly a situation to champion if we are serious about abolishing the state.

Tens of thousands die or are injured in motor vehicle accidents every year.¹² If motor vehicle travel is destined to continue ATR, will the anarchist revolution keep bad drivers off the road? Will self-management of production and distribution make motorcyclists, bicyclists, or pedestrians any more visible to car, bus, and truck drivers? Will a self-managed train system prevent derailments? Will self-management prevent ships from running aground, from collisions, from oil spills? Will the federation of self-managed shipping industries be able to prevent the polluting of waterways? Will it prevent the inadvertent maiming and killing of marine mammals?

¹¹ The number of private-sector non-fatal workplace illnesses and injuries was 3.7 million in 2008, over half of which resulted in lost days, transfers, or restrictions; 940,000 were reported from the public sector. In addition, “The preliminary count of fatal work injuries in the U.S. was 5,071 in 2008, down from a revised total of 5,657 in 2007. . . . The slowing economy was likely a factor in at least part of the decline.” US Department of Labor website.

¹² “There were an estimated 3.6 million highway-related injuries in the United States in 2001. . . . An estimated 3.3 million of these injuries involved motor vehicle occupants. The rest involved about 131,000 pedestrians, 111,000 motorcyclists, and 60,000 pedalcyclists.” And “Fatalities recorded in all transportation modes are estimated to be 45,026 in 2006. Highway fatalities represented about 95% of these recorded fatalities.” US Department of Transportation website.

“Millions Will Die” and Other Absurdities

Prominent and vocal anti-primitivist anarcho-syndicalist Andrew Flood confidently avers in his essay “Civilsation, Primitivism and anarchism” (available at Anarkismo.net) that “there is no shortage of primitivists who recognize that the primitive world they desire would require ‘mass die-offs’.” Flood cites four sources: Miss Ann Thropy (not an anarchist or even a primitivist, but an old-school Earth First!er¹³); an anonymous FAQ writer (possibly an anarchist¹⁴); Derrick Jensen (also not an anarchist or a primitivist¹⁵); and the Coalition Against Civilization (the only actual self-described anarcho-primitivist project on that list). Leaving aside the actual content of the quotations, the immediate problem with these citations is that there are primitivists who are not anarchists, just as there are those who declare themselves to be against civilization who do not identify themselves as anarchists or primitivists. Refusal to

¹³ The controversial (semi-serious?) article extolling AIDS as population control was written in the mid-1980s, prior to the famous hippie versus redneck split in EF!; after this split (which the article in question did much to foment) and the departure of redneck co-founder Dave Foreman, many EF! locals became more friendly toward direct action oriented anarcho-activists. Earth First! has never been an exclusively anarchist project; from the mid-80s through mid-90s anarchist-oriented radical environmentalists in the US and Canada gravitated toward the journal *Live Wild or Die*.

¹⁴ *Do or Die*, the now-defunct publication/activist project of the British branch of Earth First! had a continuously tenuous relationship to anarchism, entirely separate from the question of primitivism; EF! in the US has an even more incoherent analysis and practice.

¹⁵ Despite having penned numerous repetitive and increasingly tedious jeremiads against civilization, his opportunistic, and half-hearted, commitment to anarchism is nicely summed up here — as far as I know the first time he’s publicly accepted the label: “I get called an anarchist a lot, and *I don’t mind*. Do I self-identify as an anarchist? Sometimes. . . I guess I’ll use it when it feels right, and I won’t when it doesn’t feel right. . . So yeah, I’m a writer, I’m an anarchist, I’m an anarcho-primitivist, *whatever* you want to call me, *whatever*, but then I’m a capitalist for that matter. . . and damn proud of it. *Whatever. . .*” **Mythmakers and Lawbreakers** (AK Press, 2009, pp 29–30, my emphasis.) At the time Flood wrote his critique, Jensen was indeed cozy with a few anarcho-primitivists who continually tried to enlist him involuntarily; recently there has been a thorough falling out, due in large part to Jensen’s monumental ego and accompanying inability to deal with even the slightest criticism, constructive or otherwise.

recognize and acknowledge those distinctions (which, admittedly, can be quite subtle) is simply dishonest.¹⁶

Unfortunately for Flood (and others who wish to rely on his points), two of those authors do not profess to be anarchists, so their discussions/admissions/desires are irrelevant, unless Flood wishes to add the use of guilt by (his) association to his rhetorical armory. A further complication arises: who are we to choose as representative of a particular tendency? In order to discredit specific tendencies within anarchism, or anarchism in general, it is always possible to quote ridiculous anarchists (Christians, pacifists, anti-imperialists. . . pick your least favorite). But what would be the point, other than to prove that there are ridiculous anarchists? It is difficult enough for all anarchists to agree about the relative importance of various anarchist theorists, let alone to decide that they are the *real* representatives of an authentic or traditional anarchism. Given that anarchism is a complex and contradictory philosophy, it is usually better to avoid such exercises.¹⁷ Flood’s decision to make certain writers into typical primitivists is not credible; choosing to elevate any marginal writer into some allegedly average representative of anarchism in general — or any of its sub-tendencies (like primitivism) — is the epitome of bad faith, and is especially annoying coming from someone who has taken it upon himself to defend anarchism from fake anarchists and other distractions.

In addition there’s an enormous difference between acknowledging that a speculative non-industrial lifeway would most likely necessitate

¹⁶ Complaints about conflating neo-Platformists and anarcho-syndicalists abound as well, with those making the equation refusing to take seriously what members of either tendency say about themselves.

¹⁷ Virtually all anarchists everywhere agree that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, as the first person to call himself an anarchist proudly, was an important early figure of anarchist theory; not all find his insights or plans particularly relevant, however. Similar problems arise when we examine other famous or not-so-famous anarchist thinkers. There is a tension — and therefore a challenge for honest anarchists — between needing to acknowledge someone’s presence within the anarchist tradition even when we may disagree with her ideas and analysis. Bakunin and Kropotkin are less problematic than Proudhon, but are no less impervious to criticism. For a bizarre exercise in sectarianism and rewriting of history (complete with what may be the first full repudiation and excommunication of Proudhon), see **Black Flame** (reviewed elsewhere in this issue).