

*Pendleton Vandiver*

# Anarchist Epistemology

2001

# Contents

What is an epistemology? .....	3
--------------------------------	---

## What is an epistemology?

Anarchism, as a political philosophy that is roughly 200 years old, is a product of modern Western society. This makes many of the assumptions underlying anarchist theory worthy of scrutiny by anyone who considers it to be her project to undermine, overthrow, or destroy modern Western society, in other words, anyone who considers herself an anarchist. Since anarchism is a philosophy that points beyond itself, anarchist epistemology will always be problematic. This is because the anarchist goal, as I see it, is not to install a new political system called anarchism; rather, the goal is to promote anarchy. Anarchism is an expedient which is employed in promoting anarchy, and as such tends to recoil upon purists and systematizers who seek to craft an ultimate anarchist theory.

Classical anarchism is increasingly being called into question because it accepts too many of the assumptions of the dominant culture from which it sprang. For this reason, the root of the various problems with classical anarchism is an epistemological one. Anarchists are becoming more and more suspicious, if not downright hostile, toward ideas which seek to eliminate the trappings of political and economic power while leaving intact the mechanisms of domination which allow this power to thrive. The industrial system is no longer seen as a benign engine of progress which needs to be placed in the hands of the workers. Anarchism, in short, is becoming green, and this simply means that it is becoming global, it is addressing the totality of life, not just inhabiting a cordoned-off political sphere, because it cannot afford to leave oppression any place to hide.

Anarcho-primitivism is an example of this tendency within anarchism. It is not merely political structures that are called into question by primitivists, but fundamental forms of human communication and categories of thought. Primitivism is a radical critique in that it seeks to identify the roots of oppression. John Zerzan's writings are particularly probing in that they explore the supposed origins of alienation and social stratification in the (usually taken for granted) categories of time, language, number, art and agriculture.

The primitivist critique is very important, and cannot be ignored by anyone with a green anarchist orientation. Yet there are vexing contradictions in much primitivist theory, which seem to result from a lack of consideration of epistemology. The proponents of this philosophy purport to call into question civilization in total. *A Primitivist Primer* by John Moore calls anarcho-primitivism a shorthand term for a radical current that critiques the totality of civilization from an anarchist perspective, yet they mostly place themselves firmly within Western scientific discourse with their reliance on anthropological data. If anarcho-primitivism were primarily an immanent critique, exploring the aims and methods of

civilization in order to show that they are inconsistent with one another, perhaps it could afford to rely upon a perspective that is supplied to it by Western science. But anarcho-primitivism is purporting to tell us how to go outside of civilization, and the outside that is being posited is totally, qualitatively other. The fact that this other is being defined, from top to bottom, by the very institutions that are being called into question scarcely seems to perturb anarcho-primitivist theorists.

The juxtaposition of uncompromising purism and naiveté that is revealed in much primitivist writing is often jarring, even shocking. A quote from Zerzan's *Elements of Refusal* is emblematic of the unacknowledged irony that pervades much of the anarcho-primitivist critique: "In fact, [primitive] life was lived in a continuous present, (12) underlying the point that historical time is not inherent in reality, but an imposition on it." It does not matter what source that little number 12 is asking us to consider. After informing the reader that this indemonstrable assertion is a "fact", Zerzan duly provides a footnote to prove it! That the assertion may in some sense be true, I do not wish to contest. The point is that an entirely unscientific, indeed anti-scientific, stance is being dressed up in academic attire in order to give the entire proceeding an air of rigor and methodological legitimacy that can only seem congruous to the superficial reader. The thesis itself, that time is the primal cause of alienation, is worth considering, and indeed Zerzan is a wonderful writer who often says important things. Yet epistemologically, we are getting into hot water when we simultaneously challenge the very existence of civilization while accepting its methodology and its conclusions.

Indeed, the entire primitivist project is saddled with the unfortunate onus of a purist theory that is riddled with impurities it does not even seek to address. The primitivist tendency to valorize nature over culture is naive because it forgets that culture necessarily defines nature. The definition of nature as anything that is not culture is always going to be useful to power, because it equates nature with everything that is already subjugated and offers its opponents the opportunity to identify themselves with the defeated. This is a suckers game, and provides the necessary conditions within which an unwittingly loyal opposition can form around the most ostensibly radical critique. To completely oppose civilization as it defines itself is to grant it hegemony over everything it claims as its own. If we wish to destroy civilization, we should also seek to define it on our terms — which an anarchist epistemology would seek to provide.

Primitivists have hitched their wagon to a star, and it would behoove them to look at the trajectory of that star if they want to see where they are headed. Thirty years ago, anthropologists painted a very different picture of what primitive life was like; thirty years from now, the picture is also likely to look different. In that case, the entire social philosophy of anarcho-primitivism will likewise change. How can a critique which purports to be so radical allow itself to be compromised

by direct intimacy with the very institutions it claims to oppose? Unless primitivist theory confronts the question of epistemology, it will not remain a vital force in anarchism.

What would a truly anarchist epistemology look like? I suspect that an anarchist epistemology would be an epistemology of desire. By this, I do not mean that we should seek to completely instrumentalize knowledge; desire always springs from an idea of what is, and I have no use for an epistemological stance that says, “what I want to be true, is therefore true.” I simply mean that, as anarchists, we know what we want; this does not, cannot, depend on scientific fads and societal whims. While it is certainly possible that our desires themselves are socially constructed, to invalidate them because of this possibility would eviscerate the anarchist critique to the point of irrelevance. Therefore, I submit that there are basic, bedrock truths without which anarchism would be unrecognizable. These are not necessarily truths about the world, but they are truths about anarchism.

All anarchists want to live as freely as possible. This is unequivocally true; to be an anarchist, it is necessary to have this goal. This is a foundational truth from which any other anarchist theory has to proceed in order to be an anarchist theory. This is not to say that it is necessarily true that freedom is the goal of human existence. Rather, what I think is evident is the more modest claim that there are some modes of thinking which can properly be labeled anarchist, and some which cannot be accurately so-called. Anarchist thinking is, by definition, primarily concerned with the goal of freedom. Of course, what this means in practice is somewhat ambiguous, but as a general goal this is an immutable truth about anarchism.

Secondly, to the extent that anarchy is in any sense green, we want to live in a manner that is sustainable, both ecologically and socially. Since the institutions and practices that cause massive ecological destruction have, until now, also been involved in suppressing human freedom, this second statement should in no way conflict with the first, although it is not logically inconceivable that a situation would arise in which it did. If this were to happen, it is entirely possible that an anarchist would decide to forgo freedom in favor of sustainability, but in doing so he would not be acting as an anarchist. In other words, even if someone does not consider anarchism (which, as I noted earlier, is an expedient) the most appropriate response to a situation, he should acknowledge that what he is advocating is not anarchy if it does not create a situation in which we can live as freely as possible.

Although anarchism values freedom over sustainability, it does not see the two as conflicting with one another. A free life should be a sustainable life, because people acting as free individuals are not involved in institutions which are inherently oppressive as well as destructive.

The implications of this for anarchist epistemology are as follows: no matter what sources our information comes from, our goals do not emanate from those sources or from that information. Therefore, anarchy is not what Western anthropologists tell us it is. For instance, if anthropologists suddenly decide that foraging bands were extremely patriarchal after all, anarchists will not revise their vision of anarchy to include patriarchy. If something like this happens, anarcho-primitivists will be forced to either drop the anarcho- prefix, or drop the primitivist-suffix, because patriarchy is incompatible with anarchy. We know this, because we know what it is that we want. This is what I mean by an epistemology of desire. Knowledge without meaning is simply data, and meaning is knowledge informed by desire. This definition of meaning is crucial, because it is my contention that any other definition will lead to authoritarian consequences.

We all rely on various sources to give us information about the world. An anarchist epistemology does not declare scientific sources invalid a priori. We should be perfectly willing to use this type of information as a tool. Yet if anarchy is completely identified with a view of an epoch in human existence that belongs to one historical phase of Western science, then anarchism has become an integral part, not just of civilization, but of one particular phase of civilization thirty years. This is a serious lapse in anarchist thinking, and it is directly attributable to a lack of concern with epistemology.

It is difficult not to suspect that, if we allow our desires to be channeled into a prepackaged scientific picture of utopia, we are buying another commodity being peddled to us by Western civilization. To completely identify everything we want with one specific (pre-)historical epoch is to miss the point of anarchy and succumb to mere nostalgia; worse, nostalgia for a past that is simply an abstraction. We want to live our own lives as freely and sustainably as possible, not to accept some social model that has been concocted by anthropologists. Whatever the specific sources of our information, an anarchist critique needs to employ an anarchist epistemology in order to avoid subordinating its agenda to that of Western science, or to any other institution.

The guidelines for an anarchist epistemology that I have suggested are very broad, perhaps even vague. I feel that this is necessary because, although the process of interpreting knowledge is complex, we should keep a few general principles in mind when doing so. If I were to give a specific epistemological theory, it would no longer be an anarchist epistemology. For anarchists, it is above all the desire for freedom that allows knowledge to be coherent and empowering.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright  
May 21, 2012



Pendleton Vandiver  
Anarchist Epistemology  
2001

Published July 22, 2001  
Retrieved on July 21, 2009 from [www.insurgentdesire.org.uk](http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk)