Various Authors

A Dialog on Primitivism

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A Dialog on Primitivism: Lawrence Jarach interviews John Zerzan

There are many prejudiced caricatures and objections concerning primitivism; for example that its proponents want to go "back to the Stone Age," or that any move away from industrial capitalism would result in an immediate mass die-off of thousands — if not millions — of humans. These dismissals showcase a lack of seriousness on the part of anti-primitivists, and their refusal to engage in any kind of substantial dialog around the issues of the origins of capitalism and the various mechanisms of social control and domination. While understandable coming from non-anarchists (who are engaged in promoting one or another form of domination and exploitation), such a knee-jerk reaction from anarchists and antiauthoritarians is cause for concern. Can it really be the case that the issues of industrialization, urbanism, centralized technologies, and the furthering of hierarchical power relations that arise from these phenomena are off-limits to anarchist discourse?

As far as I can tell, most primitivists only want to go back as far as the Iron Age. As for the supposed mass die-off, this devastation wouldn't touch the majority of people in the non- and semi-industrial areas of Asia, Africa, and South America, who are already experiencing mass starvation and death. People in these places are suffering and dying at the hands of the current regimes of austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund, and occasionally backed up by US/UN military force. Then there's the overproduction and exporting of cash crops (with its disruption of traditionally sustainable land use and agriculture, and the reliance on petro-chemical fertilizers and genetically engineered seed) to offset government debts. The idea that these areas need to become even more industrialized in order to "save" their populations from starvation and mass death is the self-serving position of the brains behind the World Bank, IMF, NAFTA, GATT, WTO, etc. It is appalling that many anarchists seem to believe the assumptions and conclusions of these technocrats, bankers, and capitalists.

In order to clarify some of the misunderstandings about primitivism, I initiated this dialog with John Zerzan, considered by many to be the main theoretician and spokesperson of anarcho-primitivism, one of the newest trends within antiauthoritarianism.

Lawrence Jarach: There are many ecologically minded anarchists these days, from Social Ecologists to Green Anarchists, to Earth Firsters, to primitivists. It seems that there are many areas of overlapping concerns and analyses, but also

differences in terms of strategies for promoting these visions of a better future. Green anarchists for example, seem to take their strategic cue from the direct action wing of Earth First!, while not necessarily espousing the EF! ideas of neo-Malthusianism. Primitivism, on the other hand, seems to be a more theoretical perspective, celebrating (critically, of course) the pre-civilization 99% of human existence when there was no state or any other institutionalized forms of political power. Social Ecology, as articulated by Murray Bookchin, seems to emphasize the rational ability of humans to intervene ethically and wisely in the natural world, while leaving much of the industrial base of modern capitalism untouched aside from some sort of federated quasi-syndicalist self-management. Social Ecologists take the existence of urban industrialism for granted, while primitivist discourse rejects the inevitability of it. Social Ecologists build on the assumptions of leftism (which has social control as one of its foundational principles) and their analyses and strategies for social change come from it. My sense is that primitivism is a critical and analytical framework, while green anarchists engage in actions that make sense from that framework. Would it be correct to say that while all social ecologists are leftists, not all green anarchists are primitivists? What are the differences as you understand them?

John Zerzan: Yes, all social ecologists seem to embrace not only mass production and highly developed technology, but also the division of labor and domestication that undergird them and drive them forward to new levels of standardization and estrangement. Social ecology is perhaps the last refuge of the left, as "green" awareness necessarily spreads. But it is also true that green anarchists may actually hold onto some of the same basic institutions. I'm referring to those who explicitly reject the "primitivist" point of view. To me primitivism (and I use the term reluctantly, as shorthand, hoping it does not harden into an ideology or dogma) means questioning and rejecting such basic institutions as division of labor and domestication. Green Anarchist (U.K.) is very clearly primitivist, rejecting civilization and its basis, agriculture (domestication). The founding editor of Green Anarchy (U.S.), on the other hand, is a green anarchist but not a primitivist. He has no problem with domestication.

What I fear, as the new movement develops, is the age-old enemy, co-optation or recuperation. Green anarchism sounds good, it's the coming thing, but it may be too vague or flabby. What does it really mean? How far do green anarchists want to go, see the need to go? What institutions does Green Anarchism place off-limits to critique, that are not part of the deepening crisis?

LJ: The first and seemingly main objection thrown at a primitivist outlook is that "millions will die immediately" whether through starvation or genocide, if the state and industrial civilization were dismantled. How do you respond to this accusation?

JZ: Civilization has always told people that they can't survive without its comforts and protections. Outside the city walls lie danger, chaos, death. We've always been held hostage to civilization, which is not to forget that billions of people now inhabit the planet. Perhaps the key word in your question is "immediately." In other words, if the whole prevailing apparatus vanished instantly somehow, millions probably would die. (Many have died and continue to die untimely deaths under the present system, by the way.)

The key is in how a changeover would come about. Perhaps the only way it could happen is when most people decide that change needs to happen, and thus become involved in making it happen. When/if this occurs, a transition would be creatively undertaken in the interests of those involved. Not in an instant, but as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Briefly, one specific example is a new paradigm for food. The work of Mollison and, even more, Fukuoka, for instance, show that a great deal of vegetables can be grown in very small areas. This method not only avoids the great energy waste of global transportation, storage, etc., but can move in anti-domestication directions. Fukuoka's "no-work" approach reminds me of the Johnny Appleseed story, which certainly also had anti-private property implications.

LJ: The line that civilizers throw at the rest of us concerning survival reminds me of the same line that technocrats throw at the rest of us about so-called labor-saving devices freeing up our time so that it can be used for more interesting and fun things. In fact, all these devices have made it possible for the workers operating them to increase their productive output for the same wage as before the introduction of the device. The "labor-saving" is on the boss's side: he can save on the wage-labor he has to expend, thereby increasing his profits. It's the typical authoritarian lie: "this is for your own good." Do you think it would be possible to invent a device that actually would be time-saving and still be acceptable for technophobes or primitivists?

JZ: I recall someone with Fifth Estate asserting, about 20 years ago, that there simply is no "labor-saving device." Basically meaning that when any machine or device is deconstructed, it can be seen to contain more congealed or required labor than is actually "saved" by its use. This would include all kinds of hidden inputs, such as storage, transportation, marketing, etc. I've never heard this assertion refuted.

For me, however, it is not so much whether or not there is a saving, work-wise, as whether or not division of labor is involved. If division of labor destroys wholeness, autonomy, non-hierarchy, that is more important. In fact, it may be that only non-division-of-labor devices (like a lever or incline) are actually labor-saving.

LJ: The critique of civilization and technology leads to some interesting ideas from a philosophical and even epistemological perspective. For example the conclusion that you have drawn concerning the process of symbolic thought (language, music, numbers, art): that it results in domestication, and that it is domestication of plants and animals that then leads to civilization, which in turn would be impossible without institutionalized hierarchies and political power. Yet clearly we cannot reject the use of language or music or other forms of symbolic thought today. Does a critique necessitate a rejection? I don't like automobiles or computers, but I have one of each. Because I have a critique of their manufacture and use within the parameters of 21st century American industrial capitalism, does that mean that I can't use them? If I didn't have the critique, would I be "off the hook" in terms of my responsibility for the continuation of their hegemony?

JZ: As for how to dismantle symbolic culture itself, all I can say is that first the topic needs to be addressed. It hasn't been yet, so let's start there. But a critique does mean a rejection, otherwise it's just talk, just more accommodation to what is. In the same vein, people may deny that a problem exists; but this may turn out later to have been an unforgivable failure of moral imagination. History has judged, over and over, that for subsequent generations, ignorance and denial do not excuse the complicity inherent in doing nothing. Acquiescence to slavery, Nazi ascendancy, and Stalinist terror are only three of many recent examples. A lot of contemporary authors present a near-complete indictment, only to cop out at the very end. Any number of books say, in effect, "Naturally, I don't advocate actually dismantling the present society. I just mean that we have to think about it differently." Or some similar inconsequential nonsense. That's how people get published.

LJ: I see your point about the relation of critique to rejection. And I have no problem with the idea that should the industrial infrastructure become unusable, I'd have to turn to alternate modes of transportation and communication. In the meantime, does it make sense to use the technologies that exist in order to spread these critiques? I'm thinking about the new website primitivism.com which, upon first hearing the term, sounds totally absurd. Yet the site contains the best essays on the topic I've seen in one place, plus there's a discussion board where the assumptions of primitivism are challenged and refined. You and I have had already had discussions about using radio and television. Where, if at all, do we draw the line of not using what we might consider to be the most destructive technologies? Is it up to each of is to decide? And wouldn't this drawing of the line create a moral hierarchy in terms of ranking the worst technologies?

JZ: We are all complicit in the reproduction of society. We all live in it, not on some other planet or in a gatherer-hunter mode. So I am generally wary about feeling able to establish priorities about the use of technologies.

But I'm not sure a "moral hierarchy" is involved in trying to avoid being completely arbitrary about it, on the other hand. In other words, various technologies have different characteristics which make some more estranging than others. Some are more mediated, artificial, and remote. Radio is less colonizing than TV, I would say. Non-commercial cable-access TV does not have all the negatives that network television does. There are some obvious distinctions, even if one could argue that at times other factors might override them. Perhaps, for example, an urgent need to communicate with a lot of people in a given situation.

I guess this tends to get into the knotty question of media, related but somewhat different. If we conclude that we need to use certain technologies so as not to be at a severe disadvantage, we should remember what they consist of and not forget to make such analysis clear. Who else tries to discuss the nature of technology and its consequences?

LJ: There are things about modern civilization that are indispensable for the continuation of urban existence-sewage treatment for example. Is a primitivist vision at all compatible with urban life? Does it necessitate the abandonment of cities? What about people who want to live in cities, and who could (hypothetically) be able to develop an anarchic method of controlling and maintaining urbanism without the more unsavory aspects of it? (I'm thinking here of the anarcho-syndicalist tradition specifically.) Would green anarchists denounce and/or oppose this hypothetical anti-hierarchical, antiauthoritarian urbanism as incompatible with a truer anarchic vision? And if so, how would that not be an ideological objection? I guess what I'm getting at here is that there seems to be in primitivism (as a theory) and green anarchism (as its practice) just as much danger of ideological rigidity and dogmatism as in any other theory. Are there any possibilities for transitional stages between urbanism and primitivism? If not, doesn't that make primitivism maximalist, with all the inherent moralism of a maximalist program?

JZ: I want to live in a city at present, for various reasons. Language, art, etc. are also interesting, even indispensable given the present conditions. But in a disalienated world would these compensations or consolations be necessary or interesting? "The Case Against Art," for instance, does not really bash art; it is mainly an exploration of how art arrived, along with alienation. The corollary question, again, is whether art's role will always be needed.

Getting back to the city, think of all the negative developments that bring cities into existence. What are they for? Commerce, rule, taxation, specialization, etc., etc. Take those away and where's the city? The things that sustain a city are still part of the problem. Maybe in its place we'll see fluid sites of festival, reunion, play. Who knows?

The challenge of an anti-civilization transition is a very real, serious one. It won't be effected by snapping our fingers or making absolutist judgments about what must be.

There is also the danger of temporizing, of half-measures, of being co-opted. An old line says that those who make half a revolution only dig their own graves, only strengthen the hold of the old society. The change needs to be qualitative, decisive, pursued with all possible speed and resolve. There is a danger of merely re-forming the basic system by changing only some of it, and thus not breaking its hold over life.

LJ: I met a guy at the North American Anarchist Conference who's diabetic. As he was testing his blood-sugar level with a computerized monitor, someone snidely asserted to me that this guy would be dead if it weren't for "technology." Aside from the totally uncritical acceptance of the insulated and arrogant ideology and healing modality of allopathic medicine as represented by the American Medical Association, this does bring up a pertinent question. Are there any good things that have come out of civilization? Advances in medicine for example? Without the advances in fiberoptics, my father probably would have died from his heart attack, like my grandfather. That particular medical application derived from the seemingly unrelated technology of communications, which probably wouldn't have advanced to that point if it weren't for its military applications. Outside of the necessity for self-preservation and self-replication of institutions of power and knowledge, have there been any tangible benefits for humans? Longer life-expectancy, sanitation (clean water being the best example of that), the ability to communicate with more people . . . it would seem that none of these things would be available in such so-called abundance (if we can afford to buy them) if not for the existence of civilization. On the other hand, whatever technological so-called benefits have accrued to people outside the institutions that create them have been either incidental or accidental.

JZ: I suppose most everyone is hopeful about such things as "advances in medicine." Fredy Perlman no doubt hoped that he would survive his last heart surgery in 1985.

On the other hand, we can also see that the technological system always promises solutions to problems it has created. "Just a little more technological advance and all will be fine." What a lie that is, and has been from the beginning.

Stress, toxins, isolation, the sheer magnitude of alienation bring such a multiplicity of disease. Epidemic cancer, tens of millions on anti-depressants just to get through the day, alarming rates of health-threatening obesity, new "mystery" illnesses all the time (such as fibromyalgia, with no known cause), millions of kids under five drugged into compliance with this empty world. The list could go on and on.

We have always been held captive by civilization, in various ways. At some point the captivity may not seem worth it to most people, as life, health, freedom, authenticity continue to dwindle away.

LJ: When you were in LA, and on the tour you had of parts of Europe and the East Coast, were there any questions that people asked you that made you think about some of the assumptions that you took for granted? Did any experiences prod you to think about the distinguishing characteristics of primitivism/green anarchy? What was the worst experience on your travels? The best? JZ: I frankly don't remember being challenged all that much, maybe because primitivist theses are a novelty to so many people. The main opposition came from anarcho-leftists, often desperate in their defense of the old anarchism, the failed, superficial, workerist, productionist model. I didn't hear anything new in their protestations, except, in their defensiveness, evidence that they are losing and know it.

The turnouts were good, the range of questions good, and I sensed a receptiveness to new ideas. In fact, the main hit I got overall was the awareness that something new is needed. I didn't have any negative experiences, really.

LJ: What are the main objections (and their shortcomings) to primitivism that derive from "old anarchism"? How are they different from the non-anarchist protestations? You told me about a Social Ecologist at the talk you gave at Yale, where she stood up, denounced primitivism and you, then stormed out of the room-effectively shutting down any possibility of discussion, heated or otherwise. Is condemnation like that typical of the interactions you have with anarcho-leftists?

JZ: Classical anarchism is a fixed body of ideas that is not fully informed by the conditions of contemporary society. The plight of both outer nature and inner nature has worsened hugely, in my opinion, since the 19$^{\text{th}}$ century. Thus we are led to question what used to be givens, question and indict some basic institutions that seem to be at the root of our present extremity.

Anarchism, insofar as it wants to remain part of the left, does not appear to want such questioning. It may be that non-anarchists are more open to new perspectives than dogmatic "old anarchists." Hope I'm wrong, but Social Ecologists, [and] various leftist anarchists seem quite closed to examining basics like division of labor, domestication, technology, civilization.

Why I Am a Primitivist *by Michael William*

If asked if I'm a primitivist I'd answer that I am, although the term is not really satisfactory. I prefer anticivilizationist, though that has its problems too. Labels are quite the pain in the ass. At one point I stopped calling myself an anarchist because I didn't agree with most anarchists but I did start calling myself an anarchist again eventually — the name belongs to me as much as anyone else.

Primitivism is an extreme response to an extreme situation of industrialism out of control. For me, simply critiquing the present techno-structure is not enough: I want to begin to dismantle it. How far do I want to go? How far can we go? I don't know. That remains to be seen.

I grew up in the fifties and sixties, the last era of unvarnished techno-optimism. Not that there isn't a strong, even omnipresent, pro-tech sentiment today. But it has been tempered by a widespread realization of the extent to which industrialism has degraded the planet's ecology.

I began to move toward a primitivist position in the early eighties under the influence of the Fifth Estate and writers such as Perlman, Ellul, Camatte, and Zerzan. However, these writings only gave me a theoretical basis for what I already intuitively knew: civilization is an integral part of alienation. In other words, my instinctive dislike of techno music is completely normal.

In the anarcho-primitivist milieu no theoretical orthodoxy reigns. Influences are wide-ranging, from post-situationist to Stirnerist to taoist, deep ecologist, classical class struggle libertarian-communist, to the approach of John Zerzan. There is no lack of room for anyone who wants to carve out a space!

In recent years the *Fifth Estate*, which in the seventies and eighties did much to set the basis of a primitivist approach, has moved to a less radical, or in a term employed by FE editor Peter Werbe, a more "modest" outlook. In the letters column of the previous Anarchy, a correspondent of Werbe's quotes him as saying: "At present, I feel a little foolish advocating the end of civilization when what that looks like is Congo or Afghanistan." Congo or Afghanistan? In the Congo a regional war is taking place involving half a dozen states. Acting as a perk for Zimbabwe's participation, for example, is access to diamond mines. In Afghanistan various radical Islamic outfits formerly fighting the Soviets subsequently began fighting among themselves. The last I heard the Taliban were clutching copies of the Koran, not old Fifth Estate reprints from the eighties.

My outlook is not premised on the lifeways of specific primitive groups or a belief in the existence of a past golden age of humanity in harmony with nature (although this may have occurred). It is based on trying to achieve the kind of

world I desire along with others. But I also believe it valuable to examine groups which have lived in less encumbered ways, and in coming years I hope to do more anthropological reading.

Although a critique of technique/technology is clearly fundamental, a danger exists of emphasizing technology to the detriment of other aspects of domination. Such is the case in the works of Jacques Ellul and Ellul influenced Ted Kaczynski. On the other hand Ellul does show convincingly that power in modern society is predominantly in the hands of technocrats rather than economic or political movers and shakers.

Agriculture remains a controversial question. Whether one prefers an agricultural or a hunter-gatherer approach, agriculture will continue to play a role for a considerable time to come, as a transitional phase if not always an end in itself. In Quebec much traditional land lies fallow because market forces make it too expensive to grow crops. Subsistence farming has a long history in Quebec and people could renew this tradition as a way of achieving local autonomy. Some cultivated land could also be simply abandoned to the wild.

Primitivism is a more radical, more negative approach than mainstream anarchism which continues to confine its goal to self-managing the current structure, or one that is slightly modified. If the goals of primitivists appear even less likely to be achieved than those of more conventional radicals, the fact is that today revolutionaries of all stripes are far from achieving their goals. I see no need to moderate my approach just because we live in non-revolutionary times.

Living in the city, it is impossible to avoid the corrosive effects of urban alienation. I attempt to attenuate them by avoiding computers, by walking when possible, and by staying in contact with city green spaces. At last year's local anarchist book fair I participated in a panel on the subject of the Internet. I argued that it would be preferable to foster face-to-face communication instead. I also do book tables at which I sell selected books and magazines.

Well, the scope of this hastily written article has been modest. Hopefully this special issue on such an important topic will lead to a fruitful debate.

Why I am not a Primitivist *by Jason McQuinn*

The life ways of gatherer-hunter communities have become a central focus of study for many anarchists in recent years, for several good reasons. First of all, and most obviously, if we are to look at actually-existing anarchist societies, the prehistory of the species seems to have been a golden age of anarchy, community, human autonomy and freedom. Various forms of the state, enclosures of the social commons, and accumulations of dead labor (capital) have been the axiomatic organizing principles of civilized societies from the dawn of history. But, from all available evidence, they seem to have been entirely absent in the vast prehistory of the human species. The development of civilization has been the flipside of the steady erosion of both personal and communal autonomy and power within precivilized, anarchic societies and the remnant life ways still surviving from them.

Furthermore, in the last several decades within the fields of anthropology and archeology there has been an explicit and (in its implications) quite radical revaluation of the social life of these noncivilized, gatherer-hunter and horticultural societies, both prehistoric and contemporary. This revaluation has led, as many anarchist writers have pointed out (especially John Zerzan, David Watson [aka George Bradford, etc.] and Bob Black), to a greater understanding and appreciation for several key aspects of life in these societies: their emphasis on personal and community autonomy (entailing their refusal of non-reciprocal power to their head-men or chiefs), their relative lack of deadly warfare, their elegance of technique and tool-kit, their anti-work ethos (refusal to accumulate unnecessary surplus, refusal to be tied down to permanent settlements), and their emphasis on communal sharing, sensuality, celebration and play.

The rise of ecological critiques and the revaluation of nature in the last decades of the twentieth century have entailed for many a search through history for examples of ecologically sustainable societies — societies which didn't despoil the wilderness, massacre the wildlife and exploit all of the natural resources in sight. Unsurprisingly, any genuine search for ecological communities and cultures predominantly turns up hunter and gatherer societies which have never (outside of situations where they were pressured by encroaching civilizations) developed any compelling needs to build surplus accumulations of food or goods, nor to ignore or despoil their animal kin or natural surroundings. Their long-term stability and the elegance of their adaptations to their natural environments make

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hunting and gathering societies the sustainable society and sustainable economy par excellence.

Additionally, the cumulative failures of both the revolutionary social movements of the last several centuries and the continuing march of capital and technology in reshaping the world have called into question as never before the illusory ideology of progress that underpins modern civilization (as well as most oppositional movements). A progress that has promised inevitable, incremental improvements in our individual lives and the lives of all humanity (if only we keep the faith and continue supporting capitalist technological development) has been proven increasingly hollow. It has become harder and harder to maintain the lie that life now is qualitatively better than in all previous epochs. Even those who most want to fool themselves (those on the margins of capitalist privilege, power and wealth) must face increasing doubts about their rationality and their ethical values, not to mention their sanity, in a world of global warming, mass extinctions, epidemic oil and toxic chemical spills, global pollution, massive clearing of rain forests, endemic Third World malnutrition and recurrent famine. All amidst an increasing polarization between an international elite of the superrich and vast masses of the powerless, landless and poor. In addition, it has become increasingly questionable whether the multiple pleasures of electric heat, chlorinated water, hydrocarbon-powered transport and electronic entertainment will ever outweigh the insidious costs of industrial enslavement, programmed leisure and our seeming reduction to objects of a scientific experiment to determine at what point we will finally lose all trace of our humanity.

The development of contemporary primitivist theories (and especially anarcho-primitivism) might thus seem to be an easy, logical and inevitable step from these foundations, although this would be to overlook other alternatives equally rooted in resistance culture. At the least, primitivism, as a multifaceted and still-developing response to the epochal crises now facing humanity, deserves our serious evaluation. It is certainly one of the several possible responses which does attempt to make sense of our current predicament in order to suggest a way out. Yet, at the same time there remain many problems with primitivist positions that have been expressed thus far. As well as potentially serious problems with the very concept of primitivism itself as a mode of theory and practice. It may make sense to examine some of the sources of primitivism first in order to identify and develop a few of its most obvious difficulties and suggest some solutions.

Primitivist strands

There are several strands of development which seem to have more or less coalesced to form the current primitivist mélange of theories and practices, at least within North America (I'm not as familiar with British primitivism). But two or three strands stand out as the most influential and important: (1) the strand growing out of Detroit's anarcho-Marxist *Black & Red* and the anarchists contributing to the *Fifth Estate*, including for awhile (2) John Zerzan, although he and the FE eventually parted ways over disagreements about the status and interpretation of agriculture, culture and domestication. Thirdly (3) some activists coming out of the *Earth First!* milieu, often influenced by deep ecologists, promote a "Back to the Pleistocene" perspective (the Pleistocene, being the geologic period during which the human species emerged).

Fredy Perlman and the Fifth Estate

Although there have been hints of radical primitivism within — and even before the advent of — the modern anarchist movement, contemporary primitivism owes most to Fredy Perlman and the Detroit Black & Red collective through which his work was published, beginning in the 1960s. Most influential of all has been his visionary reconstruction of the origins and development of civilization, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan* published in 1983. In this work, Perlman suggested that civilization originated due to the relatively harsh living conditions (in one place and time) which were seen by the tribal elite to require the development of a system of public waterways. The successful building of this system of public waterways required the actions of many individuals in the manner of a social machine under the direction of the tribal elite. And the social machine that was born became the first Leviathan, the first civilization, which grew and reproduced through wars, enslavement and the creation of ever greater social machinery. The situation we now face is a world in which the progeny of that original civilization have now successfully taken over the globe and conquered nearly all human communities. But, as Perlman points out, though almost all humanity is now trapped within civilizations, within Leviathans, there is still resistance. And, in fact, the development of civilizations from their beginnings on has always faced resistance from every non-civilized, free human community. History is the story of early civilizations destroying the relatively freer communities around them, incorporating them or exterminating them, and the succeeding story of civilizations wrestling with each other, civilizations exterminating, incorporating

or subjugating other civilizations, up to the present day. Yet resistance is still possible, and we can all trace our ancestral lineages to people who were once stateless, moneyless and in some profound sense more free.

Fredy Perlman's vision was taken up and elaborated upon by others involved in the Fifth Estate newspaper project, most notably, David Watson, who has written under a number of pseudonyms, including George Bradford. The Fifth Estate was itself an underground newspaper in the '60s, which evolved into a revolutionary anarchist newspaper in the mid-'70s, and then into an anarcho-primitivist project later in the '80s. Though the Fifth Estate has recently backed away from some of the more radical implications of its earlier stances, it remains one of the major strands of the contemporary primitivist milieu.

And although Watson's work is clearly based on Perlman's, he has also added his own concerns, including the further development of Lewis Mumford's critique of technology and the "megamachine," a defense of primitive spirituality and shamanism, and the call for a new, genuine social ecology (which will avoid the errors of Murray Bookchin's naturalism, rationalism, and post-scarcity, techno-urbanism). Watson's work can now be evaluated in a new collection of his most significant Fifth Estate writings of the 1980s titled *Against the Megamachine* (1998). But he's also the author of two previous books: *How Deep is Deep Ecology* (1989, written under the name of George Bradford) and *Beyond Bookchin: A Preface to Any Future Social Ecology* (1996).

John Zerzan

John Zerzan, probably now the most well-known torch-bearer for primitivism in North America, started questioning the origins of social alienation in a series of essays also published in the Fifth Estate throughout the '80s. These essays eventually found their way into his collection *Elements of Refusal* (1988, and a second edition in 1999). They included extreme critiques of central aspects of human culture — time, language, number and art — and an influential critique of agriculture, the watershed change in human society which Zerzan calls "the basis of civilization." (1999, p.73) However, while these "origins" essays, as they are often called, were published in the Fifth Estate, they were not always welcomed. And, in fact, each issue of FE in which they appeared usually included commentaries rejecting his conclusions in no uncertain terms. Eventually, when the Fifth Estate collective tired of publishing his originary essays, and when Zerzan was finding it harder and harder to endure the FE's obvious distaste for his line of investigation, Zerzan turned to other venues for publication, including this magazine, *Anarchy*, Michael William's short-lived *Demolition Derby*, and ultimately England's *Green Anarchist* as well, among others. A second collection of his essays, *Future Primitive and Other Essays*, was co-published by Anarchy/C.A.L. Press in association with Autonomedia in 1994. And, additionally, he has edited two important primitivist

anthologies, *Questioning Technology* (co-edited by Alice Carnes, 1988, with a second edition published in 1991) and most recently *Against Civilization* (1999).

John Zerzan may be most notorious for the blunt, no-nonsense conclusions of his originary critiques. In these essays, and in his subsequent writings — which will be familiar to readers of Anarchy magazine, he ultimately rejects all symbolic culture as alienation and a fall from a pre-civilized, pre-domesticated, pre-division-of-labor, primitive state of human nature. He has also become notorious in some circles for his embrace of the Unabomber, to whom he dedicated the second edition of *Elements of Refusal*, indicating for those who might have been unsure, that he really is serious about his critiques and our need to develop a fundamentally critical, uncompromising practice.

Earth First! and Deep Ecology

The primitivist strand developing from the Earth First! direct-action "in the defense of Mother Earth" milieu is heavily entwined with the formulation of deep ecology by Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions, among others. In this strand the Earth First! direct action community (largely based in the western US, and largely anarchist) seems to have found itself in search of a philosophical foundation appropriate to its non-urban defense of wilderness and human wildness — and found some irresistible ammunition, if not a coherent theory, in deep ecology.

Earth First! as a substantially, but certainly not completely, informal organization had its own origins in the nativist eco-anarchism of Edward Abbey (whose nature writings — like *Desert Solitaire* — and novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* were hugely influential) and the nativist radical environmentalism of David Foreman and friends. In fact, the original Earth First! often maintained an explicitly anti-immigration, North-American-wilderness-for-U.S.-&-Canadian-citizens-only approach to saving whatever wilderness could still be saved from the increasing human depredation of mining, road-building, clear cutting, agricultural exploitation, grazing and tourism in the service of contemporary mass consumer society — without ever feeling compelled to develop any critical social theory. However, once Earth First! expanded out of the southwest U.S. and became the focus of a widespread direct action movement it became clear that most of the people joining the blockades, marches, banner-hangings and lock-downs were more than a little influenced by the decidedly non-nativist social movements of the 1960s and '70s (the civil rights, anti-war, anti-nuclear, feminist and anarchist movements, etc.). The contradictions between the rank-and-file and the informal leadership in control of the Earth First! journal came to a head with the resignation of

Foreman and his subsequent inauguration of the *Wild Earth* journal with its focus on a conservation biology perspective more to his liking. The new Earth First! leadership (and the new journal collectives since Foreman's departure) reflect the actual diversity of the activists now involved in the entire Earth First! milieu — an eclectic mix of liberal/reformist environmentalists, eco-leftists (and even eco-syndicalists affiliated with the IWW), some greens, a variety of eco-anarchists and many deep ecologists. But regardless of this diversity, it is clear that deep ecology may well have the most widespread influence within the EF! milieu as a whole, including those who consider themselves to be primitivists. This seems to be mostly because Earth First! is primarily a direct action movement in defense of non-human Nature, and clearly not a socially-oriented movement, despite the often radical social commitments of many of the participants. Deep ecology provides the theoretical justification for the kind of Nature-first, society-later (if at all) attitude often prevalent in EF! It substitutes a specially constructed biocentric or eco-centric vision ("the perspective of a unified natural world" as Lone Wolf Circles puts it) for the supposed anthropocentric perspectives which privilege human values and goals in most other philosophies. And it offers a nature philosophy that merges with nature spirituality, which together help justify an eco-primitivist perspective for many activists who wish to see a huge reduction in human population and a scaling-down or elimination of industrial technology in order to reduce or remove the increasing destruction of the natural world by modern industrial society. Although the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (no primitivist himself) is usually credited with the creation of deep ecology, the book which originally made it's name in North America was Bill Devall and George Session's *Deep Ecology* (1986). Arne Naess' book, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, appeared in 1990, while George Sessions contributed *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* in 1994.

Which Primitivism?

As is obvious from this brief overview (which necessarily leaves out discussion of many details as well as other important participants and influences), the strands of the primitivist milieu are not just diverse, but often in important ways incompatible. To identify with primitivism can mean very different things to those influenced by Fredy Perlman or David Watson, John Zerzan or Arne Naess. Fredy Perlman poetically commemorates the song and dance of primitive communities, their immersion in nature and kinship with other species. For David Watson, primitivism first of all implies a celebration of the sustainable, preindustrial (though not necessarily pre-agricultural) life ways of many peoples, which he believes

are most-importantly centered on tribal cultures (especially tribal religions) and convivial tools and techniques. For John Zerzan, primitivism is first and foremost a stance demanding an end to all possible symbolic alienations and all division of labor in order that we experience the world as a reclaimed unity of experience without need for religion, art or other symbolic compensations. While for those influenced by deep ecology, primitivism means a return to a preindustrial world inhabited by a small human population able to live not only in harmony with nature, but above all with a minimal impact on all other animal and plant (and even bacterial) species.

Primitivism as ideology

Although I appreciate and respect the insights of most primitivist currents, there are obvious problems with the formulation of any critical theory primarily focusing around a primitivist identity (or any other positively conceived identity). As Bob Black has contended:

"The communist-anarchist hunter-gatherers (for that is what, to be precise, they are), past and present, are important. Not (necessarily) for their successful habitat-specific adaptations since these are, by definition, not generalizable. But because they demonstrate that life once was, that life can be, radically different. The point is not to recreate that way of life (although there may be some occasions to do that) but to appreciate that, if a life-way so utterly contradictory to ours is feasible, which indeed has a million-year track record, then maybe other life-ways contradictory to ours are feasible" (Bob Black, "Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder," published in Green Anarchist & on the web at: www.primitivism.com).

If it was obvious that primitivism always implied this type of open-ended, non-ideological stance, a primitivist identity would be much less problematic. Unfortunately, for most primitivists an idealized, hypostatized vision of primal societies tends to irresistibly displace the essential centrality of critical self-theory, whatever their occasional protestations to the contrary. The locus of critique quickly moves from the critical self-understanding of the social and natural world to the adoption of a preconceived ideal against which that world (and one's own life) is measured, an archetypally ideological stance. This nearly irresistible susceptibility to idealization is primitivism's greatest weakness.

This becomes especially clear when attempts are made to pin down the exact meaning of the primitive. In a vitally important sense there are no contemporary

"primitive" societies and there is not even any single, identifiable, archetypal "primitive" society. Although this is acknowledged even by most primitivists, its importance is not always understood. All societies now (and historically) in existence have their own histories and are contemporary societies in a most important sense, that they exist in the same world — even if far from the centers of power and wealth — as nation-states, multinational corporations and global commodity exchange. And even ancient societies which existed before the advent of agriculture and civilization in all likelihood adapted many unimaginably diverse and innovative life ways over the course of their existence. But, beyond some basic speculations, we can simply never know what these life ways were, much less, which were the most authentically primitive. While this doesn't mean that we can't learn from the life ways of contemporary hunters and gatherers — or horitculturalists, nomadic herders, and even subsistence agricultural communities, it does mean that there is no point in picking any one form of life as an ideal to be uncritically emulated, nor of hypostatizing an archetypal primitive ideal based on speculations always about what might have been.

Neither back nor forward, but wherever we choose to go

As all critics of primitivism never tire of pointing out, we can't simply go back in time. Though this is not because (as most critics believe) that social and technical "progress" is irreversible, nor because modern civilization is unavoidable. There are many historical examples of both resistance to social and technical innovations, and devolutions to what are usually considered (by the believers in Progress) not just simpler, but inferior or backward, life ways. Most importantly, we can't go back in the sense that wherever we go as a society, we have to make our departure from where we are right now. We are all caught up in an historical social process which constrains our options. As Marxists typically put it, the present material conditions of production and social relations of production largely determine the possibilities for social change. Although anarchists are increasingly (and correctly) critical of the productivist assumptions behind this type of formulation, it remains more generally true that existing conditions of social life (in all their material and cultural dimensions) do have an inertia that makes any thoughts of a "return" to previously existing (or more likely imagined) life ways extremely problematic.

But neither do we necessarily need to go forward into the future that capital and the state are preparing for us. As we are learning from history, their progress

has never been our progress — conceived as any substantial diminution of social alienation, domestication or even exploitation. Rather, we might do much better to dispense with the standard timelier of all philosophies of history in order to finally go our own way.

Only without the unnecessary, always ideological, constraints imposed by any directional interpretations of history, are we finally free to become whatever we will, rather than what some conception of progress (or of return) tells us we need to be. This doesn't mean that we can ever just ignore what we, as a global society, are right now. But it does mean that ultimately no ideology can contain or define the social revolutionary impulse without falsifying it. The vitality of this critical impulse has an existence prior to any theorizing in each and every contradiction between our immediate desires for unitary, non-alienated lives and all of the current social relations, roles and institutions which prevent these desires from being realized.

Critiques of Civilization, Progress, Technology

Much more important for us than the revaluation of what are called primitive societies and life ways is the critical examination of the society within which we live right now and the ways which it systematically alienates our life-activities and denies our desires for a more unitary and satisfying way of life. And this must always be foremost a process of negation, an imminent critique of our lives from within rather than from without. Ideological critiques, while containing a negative component, always remain centered outside of our lives around some sort of positive ideal to which we must eventually conform. The power of their (oversimplified) social criticisms is gained at the expense of denying the necessary centrality of our own lives and our own perspectives to any genuine critique of our social alienation.

The primitivist milieu has developed and popularized critiques of civilization, progress and technology and that is its most important strength. I don't consider myself a primitivist because of what I see as the inherently ideological thrust of any theory which idealizes a particular form of life (whether or not it has ever actually existed). But this does not mean that I am any less critical of civilization, progress or technology. Rather, I see these critiques as essential to the renewal and further radicalization of any genuine attempts at general contemporary social critique.

Primitivism as an ideology is stuck in an unenviable position ultimately demanding the construction of a complex form of society (however much disputed in particulars) that obviously requires not only massive social transformations,

technical changes and population dislocations, but the relatively quick abandonment of at least 10,000 years of civilized development. It is an understatement to say that this poses enormous risks for our survival as individuals, and even, conceivably, as a species (due to the primarily to potential threats of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare that could be unleashed). Yet primitivism can at best offer only indeterminate promises of highly speculative results, even under the most favorably imaginable circumstances: the eventual, worldwide demoralization and capitulation of the most powerful ruling classes, without too many significant civil wars fought by factions attempting to restore the collapsing old order in part or in total. Thus primitivism, at least in this form, is never likely to command the support of more than a relatively small milieu of marginal malcontents, even under conditions of substantial social collapse.

But the critique of civilization doesn't have to mean the ideological rejection of every historical social development over the course of the last 10 or 20,000 years. The critique of progress doesn't mean that we need to return to a previous way of life or set about constructing some preconceived, idealized state of non-civilization. The critique of technology doesn't mean that we can't successfully work to eliminate only the most egregious forms of technological production, consumption and control first, while leaving the less intensive, less socially- and ecologically-destructive forms of technology for later transformation or elimination (while also, of course, attempting to minimize their alienating effects). What all this does mean is that it can be much more powerful to formulate a revolutionary position that won't lend itself so readily to degeneration into ideology. And that primitivism, shorn of all its ideological proclivities, is better off with another name.

What should a social revolutionary perspective be called which includes critiques of civilization, progress and technology, all integrated with critiques of alienation, ideology, morality and religion? I can't say that there is any formulation that won't also have significant potential for degeneration into ideology. But I doubt that we would do worse than "primitivism."

I will likely continue to identify most with the simple label of "anarchist," trusting in part that over time the most valid critiques now identified closely with primitivism will be increasingly incorporated into and identified closely with the anarchist milieu, both within anarchist theory and anarchist practice. Anarcho-leftists won't like this process. And neither will anarcho-liberals and others. But the critique of civilization is here to stay, along with its corollary critiques of progress and technology. The continued deepening of worldwide social crises resulting from the unceasing developments of capital, technology and state will not allow those anarchists still resistant to the deepening of critique to ignore the implications of these crises forever.

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We now stand at the beginning of a new century. Many would say we're no closer to anarchy now than we were a two centuries ago in the times of Godwin, Courderoy or Proudhon. Many more might say that we are increasingly further away. Or are we? If we can formulate a more powerful critique, more resistant to the temptations of ideology; and if we can develop a more radical and intransigent, yet open-ended practice, perhaps we still have a fighting chance to influence the inevitable revolutions still to come.

The Question of Primitivism *by Alex Trotter*

An anarchist search for the primitive actually involves multiple questions. Is civilization itself really the problem? Is its overcoming a realistic possibility? Is it to be overthrown or abandoned?

The radical anthropology that many anarchists have recently taken interest in has the merit of demonstrating that humanity has lived the great bulk of its time on earth in hunter-gatherer bands free of class hierarchy, alienated division of labor, sexual inequality, and devastating technological warfare. In light of all the failed revolutions of modern history it provides us with a glimpse of the only human communities that have ever really been what could be called anarchist or communist in a sustained and successful way. This in itself is a powerful counter to Hobbesian and other ideologues who argue that the nature of the human beast requires authoritarian controls. But drawing a politics out of this anthropology is tricky. Civilization may well have been a mistake from the start, but it could be something that we are more or less stuck with. The idea of primitivism implies, in its most radical form, a return to a golden age of hunter-gatherer society, although few if any of even the most ardent critics of civilization advocate this course. An absolutist primitivism can arrive at the conclusion that the human species itself is the problem, with a resulting misanthropic nihilism. Although I will agree that civilization has deeply alienated humanity from the rest of nature, and that today it seems to take on the aspect of a colossal prolonged train wreck, I don't believe that all of its products (e.g., books, chess, wine, to name a few of my own likes) are evil; some aspects of civilization are probably worth preserving even as its more oppressive and harmful aspects deserve dismantling. We certainly need to free ourselves from a toxic overcivilization and reconcile with nature, but I am skeptical about the feasibility and even desirability of an absolute destruction or abandonment of civilization. Before returning to these questions, I will briefly examine the origins of contemporary primitivism (if that's really what we want to call it) and its quarrel with Marxism and leftism.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a green anarchism, but it should be remembered that contemporary primitivism and its affines (deep ecology excepted) have strong roots in European ultraleft Marxism, or rather, in attempts to transcend it following the great near-revolution of 1968 in France and gathering momentum up to the present time. Jacques Camatte, formerly a member of a Bordiguist party, is one of the key figures and was an important influence on Fredy Perlman and the Fifth Estate. In the 1960s Stalinism was still very much dominant as an ideological opposition to capitalism, even in some Western countries such

as France and Italy. The rejection of Marxism involved not just Stalinism and the various nationalistic ideologies (re)emerging from its decay, however, but went on to question even the less authoritarian/ideological and more critical strands of Western Marxism such as left or council communism and the Situationist International and its imitators, which had all seemingly burned out in failure or irrelevance after about 1970. The various theorists today associated with the general idea and milieu of "primitivism" went in varying directions from there, mostly toward a critical engagement with an anarchism that had begun to emerge from a long eclipse. Among them Camatte remains most indebted to Marx.

The Marxist schema of history had a place, albeit a rather small one, for prehistory in the category of "primitive communism," which would, the theory went, return on a "higher" level through the historical dialectic of class struggle. Camatte, and others such as Fredy Perlman and John Zerzan, came to the conclusion that the working class could no longer be considered the revolutionary subject, and questioned the supposed necessity of the long detour through civilization (the "wandering of humanity" or "His-story") with its various stages organized around modes of production. Marx, in contrast to just about any flavor of Marxists you can think of, had some "primitivist" tendencies of his own, which can be seen, for example, in the *Ethnological Notebooks* and in his early Paris writings on alienation, in which he pointed to communism as the emergence of human community, the natural man and woman whose free creativity, and not the development of economic forces of production, is the goal. At his best, Marx offered the perspective of radical subjectivity rather than faith in an objective process operating by rigid teleology and economic determinism. Unfortunately, it is the latter face of Marxism that the world has come to know all too well, and Engels as well as Marx himself have to share part of the blame for that.

Another radical thinker worth mentioning in this regard is Dwight Macdonald, also a refugee from left Marxism (in his case, Trotskyism), whose principal writings date from the 1940s and 1950s, a time when Stalinism was even more firmly entrenched, indeed at the zenith of its power. Macdonald was not a contemner of civilization as such (he was, in fact, rather fond of the ancient Greeks, who were, he noted approvingly, "technologically as primitive as they were esthetically civilized"), but his well-reasoned critique of Marxism placed it firmly in the context of the Western Enlightenment project of boundless faith in science, progress, and mastery over nature. Macdonald called for a renewal of an anarchism both individualist and communitarian, and free of the fetish of "scientific socialism" that had sprung from classical anarchist and Utopian thinkers as much as from Marx. The reemergence of anarchism since the 1960s has taken a much more critical stance toward science and technology than that of the bearded prophets of the

19th century. Insofar as Macdonald helped lay the groundwork for that reemergence, he can be considered a forerunner of "primitivism," although I get the sense that he may not have entirely approved of it in its present manifestations.

Whatever good there is that people associate with civilization (e.g., cultural, spiritual, or ethical achievements) usually has to do with something other than just making money, which is the alpha and omega of this society. The civilization of Capital — to the extent that it has a civilization of its own, apart from the market — and technology-driven mass culture — is a parasitic patina overlying the culture of previous forms of society, which it continually decomposes, recomposes, and packages as an immense collection of commodities to be sold and consumed. Camatte has described the present society in bleak terms as a "material community of capital" in which the social classes of the classic Marxian polarity, bourgeoisie and proletariat alike, have been suppressed or superseded in a generalized human slavery to wage labor and the commodity, and in which life itself increasingly takes on the cast of "virtual reality." In this society, by analogy with the "Asiatic mode of production," there may be revolts, but there is no exit through a dialectic of history.

But if the proletariat (whether defined, classically, as those without ownership of means of production, or more broadly, by Castoriadis and the Situationists, as those without power or control over their own lives) will not serve as revolutionary subject and force of negation in modern society, then who or what will? The antiwar, green, feminist, gay, and civil-rights "new social movements" (no longer very new at this point) coming out of the 1960s had their own understandable reasons for rejecting Marxism and the old workers' movement, but these movements have tended to become thoroughly integrated into capitalist society through postmodern academe and liberal or social democratic party politics. A deep ecology perspective might see little need for a human subject to effect revolutionary change, but most anarchists, including the "primitivists" among them, do have a vision of social revolution. Although the society of capital seems remarkably resilient, there is (or was, at least, until very recently) at least some cause for optimism. Resistance to all the various ideological, technological, and institutional supports of this society continues and seemed to be increasing dramatically, although what will now happen in the current drive to war is a big question mark.

The theory of the proletariat enunciated in the 19th century has lost its credibility but retains a half-life that continues to resonate. Bob Black, who is not a primitivist per se but shares many elements of a primitivist critique of technological society, put it this way: "The (sur)rational kernel of truth in the mystical Marxist shell is this: the 'working class' is the legendary 'revolutionary agent': but only if, by not working, it abolishes class." Zerowork takes the refusal or

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withdrawal of labor as the starting point of any effort to change or escape this world, only it rejects leftist efforts to organize such refusal through parties and unions. It is necessarily ambivalent (agnostic?) on the question of civilization and technology. In looking at ways to free humanity from work, there are different directions in which to turn. Paul La Fargue argued for automation under worker control, as did the Situationists. In this scenario technology can be seen as a potential help and not necessarily as an unmitigated force of oppression. The potential downside is that it entails a continued dependency on technology. Then there is the example of the hunter-gatherer peoples, who work hardly at all and don't use or need automation because nature makes available to them everything they need. Given that re-creating such lifeways in their original Paleolithic forms is nigh impossible, however, this example has practical limits as a model for transforming our own lives.

In considering the importance (or not) of the working class it is well to observe that most people in the world are not (post)industrial workers, but peasants. The relationship to the land is most important, and the categories of discourse associated with Marx and other 19th-century radicals are still relevant, especially the emphasis on capitalism's origins as an agricultural revolution. Camatte, who advocates movements based on community rather than class, has written much on this subject. The concept of community is frustratingly vague when applied to contemporary Western societies, but is easier to see in relation to that greater part of the world where capital has still not completely penetrated the traditional societies, and social formations whose roots predate capitalism are still the norm. In his essay on the Russian Revolution, Camatte emphasized the populist, peasant-based dimension rather than the class-struggle dialectic of bourgeoisie vs. proletariat. He made the case that the workers' councils were in a sense extensions of the peasant commune, because many of the insurrectionary workers in the rapidly industrializing Russia of that time were recent migrants from the countryside, where communal social forms prevailed. Today, in non-Western societies, urbanization and industrialization continue to grow and capital makes further inroads through the same means by which it became established in the West: enclosures and the uprooting of people from their means of subsistence on the land. But there is still at least a trace of communitarian dimension in workers' lives. People in many parts of Africa and Asia, for example, who have become workers in cities still have family, food, and other resources in their native villages in the countryside. These regions are poor in relation to North America, Western Europe, and Japan, but in the event of far-reaching industrial collapse it is conceivable they might actually fare better based on this surviving relationship to the land.

If peasant-based socialism were to take hold on a large scale, many areas of the world could be pulled out of the global market. But as long as capital remains securely in power in its metropolitan stongholds, this scenario probably won't work. Indeed, it can be said to have been tried already. Third-World Stalinism was already this attempt in many regions where, in part because of colonialism, a native bourgeoisie never really developed. Peasants have served as the foot soldiers for many revolutions, but these have all been projects of state-run capital overseen by Marxist and nationalist petty-bourgeois bureaucrats. As the 1917 revolution in Russia remained isolated and fought the White Terror with Red Terror, the Bolshevik party-state presided over the imposition of industrial society in that country. This became a pattern repeated several times disastrously throughout the 20th century as many poor nations attempted to follow the totalitarian model of Soviet or Chinese Stalinism. The world is still reeling from this process, although it now seems to have run its course.

A peasant communalism free of statist bureaucatic mediation would be worthy of support for the obstacle it could pose to the spread of capital's real domination to every corner of the world and all facets of life. It would still, of course, be based on agriculture, so it would not really be an alternative to civilization as such. In Zerzan's view agriculture is "the indispensable basis of civilization," and "liberation is impossible without its dissolution." In the most developed capitalist nations, cities are home to the majority of the population, the separation of people from the land is nearly total, and agriculture is carried out as an intensely industrialized process. But practically no one, including Zerzan, imagines that either cities or agriculture could be abandoned overnight. A transition there would certainly have to be, and it would probably be a prolonged process undertaken, if history is any indicator, in the teeth of determined counterrevolutionary efforts aimed at the restoration of the old social order (unless the present ruling elites simply throw in the towel peacefully a seemingly unlikely but not impossible scenario). Would we then be anticipating a withering away of agriculture, to replace the Marxists' "withering away of the state"? The abolition of work is a more flexible idea and is probably more likely to catch on with the plebeian multitudes than calls to abolish civilization and technology. But there is a certain utopian maximalism in this as well. These ideas might serve better as stars to navigate by, while we sail on Fourier's seas of lemonade, seeking our Northwest passage, than as actual destinations. Work can be radically minimized; it is doubtful that it can ever be entirely eliminated. As long as we're not actually living as gatherers and hunters, some production must take place. Surely there has to be a way to accomplish it without domination and coercion of our fellow human beings, or insult to the rest of nature. The "small is beautiful" idea is appealing. "Appropriate" technologies, city gardens (horticulture), and, wherever possible,

the revival of artisanal rather than industrial production are possibilities. The sheer size of the earth's human population, however, might make these solutions difficult to implement under all circumstances. Even if industrial society were cut down to size right now, the regeneration of nature could take a considerable time. In the event of another devastating world war-at this moment, alas, not just possible, but likely-resulting in the destruction of much of humansociety, the survivors may indeed be compelled to live as primitivists.

Why Primitivism (without adjectives) Makes Me Nervous *by Lawrence Jarach*

"Anarcho-primitivism opposes civilization, the context within which the various forms of oppression proliferate and become pervasive — and, indeed, possible. The aim is to develop a synthesis.of the ecologically focused, non-statist, anti-authoritarian aspects of primitive lifeways with the most advanced forms of anarchist analysis of power relations. The aim is not to replicate or return to the primitive, [but] merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy."

— John Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*

Presenting a vision of a world unencumbered by hierarchical politics and technological domination over human and non-human life, anarcho-primitivism has much to contribute to antiauthoritarian discourse. The analytical value of anarcho-primitivism is that hardly any aspect of human culture escapes critical examination; from the very foundations of agriculture and mass production, to the interrelationship between these phenomena and institutionalized forms of hierarchy and domination, very little is taken for granted. Where anarchists have traditionally critiqued the manifestations of hierarchical thinking and authoritarian social relations, anarcho-primitivists attack the assumptions behind that thinking.

Anarcho-primitivists are quick to point to the 99% of human existence before the advent of agriculture, the period of the primacy of gathering-hunting economic and social arrangements. This primal human life-way, characterized by the absence of institutionalized forms of power, shows that something radically different from the current regime of transnational industrial capitalism and politics-an anarchic arrangement in fact-is not only possible, but has had an enduring and successful track record. Further, the existence and durability of these anarchic cultures shows that the development of a hierarchical and predatory economic and political system is neither necessary nor inevitable.

Communism, syndicalism, individualism, and feminism all have anarchists who adhere to them to one degree or another. But without the anarcho- in front, these ideologies are merely variations on the themes of statism and authoritarianism. Primitivism is no different. The critique and rejection of industrial capitalism and technologically dominated civilization is not the monopoly of antiauthoritarian thinkers and activists. Some who are attracted to primitivism are partisans of

misanthropy and other forms of domination. Anarchists who are interested in extending the relevance of primitivist ideas need to distance themselves from these dead ends.

Authoritarian primitivism

Authoritarian primitivists disregard the example of gatherer-hunters; they see this form of culture as irrelevant. They are more interested in non-technologized euro-american cultural survival. (Many Deep Ecologists and the first generation of Earth First! prior to the hippie/redneck split belong in this category.) The sedentary village societies of Celtic, Teutonic and/or Norse cultivators and hunters are seen as relevant models. That they had warrior castes and raiding as an integral part of their cultures seems to be of no concern to authoritarian primitivists; indeed, many consider this heroic. Such a predatory system led directly to the establishment of the European feudal order; it seems that authoritarian primitivists wish to revitalize this decentralized social and economic arrangement with themselves as the heads of their own fiefdoms. They are not interested in the abolition of the division of labor or of the state; their model requires the adherence to the philosophy of might makes right.

This tendency is marked by a mythical understanding of land; bioregionalism (the idea that only indigenous flora and fauna belong in their native ecosystems) is made to apply to humans as well. Bioregionalist primitivists promote the so-called natural or organic belonging of a particular people/nation/ethnicity to a particular geographical area. The xenophobic populism and racist nationalism implicit in such a perspective is not difficult to spot. It is also easy to see the similarities between authoritarian primitivism and the volksgemeinschaft and blut und boden aspects of nazi ideology. This is not to say that all primitivists are crypto-fascists, but there are many characteristics of authoritarian primitivism that overlap with parts of National Socialism.

Authoritarian primitivism is also characterized by the promotion of the idea that there are too many people in the world relative to too few resources. Such a perspective is supposed to be based on scientific analyses. The elevation of Science (not empiricism, but the belief that Science is some kind of neutral and objective endeavor, a pure method of arriving at Truth) to an ideology leaves larger questions unexamined. Political and ideological assumptions inform all science, and no knowledge is separable form the use to which it is put. The field of biology is no exception. Biologism, a belief in the accuracy of euro-american biological science, plays a major part in the uglier manifestations of authoritarian and vulgar primitivism. If the assumption is that the multitude of traditionally

dispossessed people are a threat to the few who possess much, then any scientist — especially biological determinists — will provide the rationale for maintaining that dispossession.

The mantra of "too many mouths to feed" is as old as it is false. Biological research has nothing to do with the deliberate destruction of tons of grains in order to maintain maximum profits, the waste of water and plant foods to maintain the meat industry, or government subsidies for the dairy industry; these are political and economic policies. But it does have everything to do with the field of genetic modification of seed crops, which is supposed to feed the multitudes, but is used merely to maximize profits for the patent-holders of whatever frankenfoods result. Clearly biology is not some neutral way of examining life. Even so, authoritarian primitivists latch on to the most reactionary pronouncements of neo-Malthusian biologists as if it were the only game in town. We are treated to such memorable terms as "carrying capacity" with no examination of what it is that's being "carried." It isn't the human and non-human populations of a given ecosystem; it is of course the current organization of industrial capitalism and the profits of the beneficiaries of it.

Vulgar primitivism

Vulgar primitivism may be characterized primarily by a romantic idealization of primal cultures. From this type of primitivist we can hear uncritical celebrations of gatherer-hunters as egalitarian and peaceful people who live without any division of labor, in total harmony with themselves, each other, and their environments. In these cultures there is no state to be sure, and the locations of power are rarely institutionalized and almost always distributed horizontally. There are other types of cultures that share these same characteristics. Pastoralists possess domesticated animals and engage in small-scale and subsistence agriculture, and they have no institutionalized power structures either; this type of culture is certainly worthy of study for the same reasons gatherer-hunters are. But vulgar primitivists have little interest in pastoralists and small-scale agriculturalists. This is a selective (some might say manipulative) use of the anthropological literature.

The accusation of primitivists wanting to go "back to the Stone Age" is most applicable to vulgar primitivists. Some primitivists proudly proclaim that they really do want to live that way, if we can believe many of the articles in the mainstream press concerning contemporary anarchists. The most serious primitivist theorists I know, and whose essays I've read, advocate a simpler non-industrialized life, with much lower impact on the environment; they are interested in permaculture, composting toilets, wild foods, self sufficiency and generally living "off the grid."

The technological level of such a culture would most closely resemble rural life in the pre-Industrial Revolution era, combined with a "back to the land" ethos of late 20th century America. Tools and production methods up to and including the 16th through the early 19th centuries might be totally appropriate for that kind of life. This model also fits in well with the idea of local, small-scale autonomous communities that network or federate with each other-a usual (but not the only) anarchist model.

Vulgar primitivists also latch onto biologism. This can be seen in some primitivist discourse concerning overpopulation. The anti-primitivist accusation of promotion of a "mass die-off" comes into play here, and the more vulgar primitivists are reluctant to respond to it, apparently because they don't think a "mass die-off" of humans would be such a bad thing. The misanthropy inherent in this perspective is self-defeating for antiauthoritarians. Misanthropy very easily lends itself to authoritarian ideas and practices; if people in general are inherently stupid and destructive, doesn't it make sense to have some kind of enlightened leadership to oversee us, so that we don't hurt our environments or ourselves? This is one of the most basic authoritarian lies. In addition, there is a clear contradiction to this generalized misanthropy from within primitivism: how can vulgar primitivists justify the idea of an implacable human drive for destruction if humans existed so well for hundreds and thousands of years-without destroying their environments and each other?

The people who should be held directly accountable for the rampant destruction of the natural world are the scientists who (re-)engineer its genetic structure, the capitalists who profit from its exploitation, and the ideologists who justify all of it. This is a small part of humanity (both historically and contemporarily); even though a majority of people in the North benefits from the continuation of this regime of destruction, responsibility should be placed where it belongs-with those who create and maintain that regime. Primitivists discredit themselves when they blame "humanity" (as if we were some kind of plague). This diverts attention away from the real culprits.

Vulgar primitivists have taken the accusations hurled at primitivism by anti-primitivists as badges of honor. So they promote the reactionary ideas that there are too many mouths to feed, and that a critique of industrial technology necessarily means returning to a Paleolithic existence. They are knee-jerk anti-anti-primitivists with nearly no capacity for independent critical thinking, nor do they seem capable of threading their way through a coherent discussion about what it actually means to reject technological society.

Anarchist primitivism

A self-conscious anarcho-primitivism needs to begin with a critical examination of the gatherer-hunter cultures that are discussed in various ethnographies. Anarcho-primitivists need to show that this type of culture is a valuable theoretical and philosophical guide for living without industrial technology, capitalism, and the state.

There are several questions that need to be answered when relying so heavily on anthropological literature, however. How much of the ethnography is based on the (possibly idealized) interpretations of the anthropologist doing the fieldwork? How much is the supposed egalitarianism of the actual culture recognizable to us as antiauthoritarians? Is the supposed lack of violence recognizable to us? Are the sexual division of labor and the separate spheres of activity based on gender, age, and ability recognizable to us as positive examples of a stateless, non-hierarchical culture?

What if gatherer-hunter cultures do not provide us with fully positive models of anarchic cultures — those that an average anarchist would recognize as a good place to live? Does it undercut the primitivist critique if there is little or no reliance on ethnographies of gatherer-hunters? Probably not; no serious anarcho-primitivist promotes an uncritical emulation or adoption of foraging, pastoralist, and small-scale agriculturalist culture. What is needed is a critical examination of such cultures and the various ways the people in them have managed to exclude and prevent the formation of institutionalized structures of domination and exploitation. Combined with an equally critical anarchist analysis of the banal system of technologized industrial capitalism in the North and the regime of brutal accumulation and extraction of wealth from the South, anarcho-primitivism could become the most coherent analytical framework for understanding and combating the current trend of "globalization."

For an anti-ideological anarcho-primitivism

Many primitivists adhere to ideas that are pulled from one or more of the three tendencies I've identified for the purposes of this essay. It is of crucial importance for anarcho-primitivists to promote self-examination and a critique of the untenable positions that various primitivists take. When primitivists talk about a visceral or spiritual connection to the land and the plants and animals living there, anarcho-primitivists need to caution them about the relationship of this kind of mysticism to authoritarian ideologies. When primitivists talk about

overpopulation and "carrying capacity," anarcho-primitivists need to point out the reactionary nature of Malthusianism.

Similarly, when anti-primitivists accuse primitivists of being in favor of a racist "mass die-off," anarcho-primitivists need to remind them that it is the people in the un- or partially-industrialized South (whom anti-primitivists patronizingly want to protect) who will survive any temporary-or permanent-collapse of industrialized capitalism. They possess the best resources to survive any such disintegration. In fact, it is those fully integrated into and dependent on transnational euro-american capitalism who would suffer most when the store shelves are empty and the electricity stops.

An anarchist primitivism worthy of support would reject scientism, biologism, and the selective and uncritical embrace of anthropological research into gatherer-hunter cultures. It would also reject the reactionary misanthropy of blaming all humans for the domination and exploitation carried out by the rich and powerful. Further, it would reject the instinctive humanism of liberalism and socialism in favor of a balance between the actual needs of humans and the preservation and integrity of the natural world.

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May 21, 2012

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A Dialog on Primitivism

Two part special in "Anarchy — A Journal of Desire Armed" 51–52
Retrieved on February 21st, 2009 from **www.insurgentdesire.org.uk**