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Take What You Need And Compost The Rest: an introduction to post-civilized theory

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post-civilized theory
2010

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In the here and now, we learn survival skills: skinning and tanning and wire-stripping, archery and gunpowder-making. Herbalism and acupuncture, yes, but we also study the application (and making) of antibiotics, methods of surgery and dentistry. We permaculture, we rewild, and we scavenge the urban, suburban, and rural landscapes alike, learning what it means to be sustainable in a dying world. We tear up our lawns and leave only gardens. Of course, one day, we're going to tear up the pavement and leave only bikepaths.

We practice community responses to problems within our subculture, like how to deal with physical and sexual assault without involving the police. We learn about trauma (the hard way, most of the time) and how to deal with it. We keep chickens and ducks, we eat dandelions and cattails.

We live, as much as we can, as though civilization were a blight that is behind us already. And this, more than any writing, will be our propaganda. Because yes, you can live this way. And yes, it is better. A meal means so much more when you grow or gather it yourself, and friends are so much closer when they're treated as equals. Feral in a tailcoat, that's us. When we look at the world around us, we take what we need and compost the rest.

we'll face something much, much worse. Ecological collapse will shatter the world as we know it. If any of us are alive when the dust has cleared, nothing will be the same.

We need to be done with civilization as soon as possible, lest civilization destroy us all.

In The Meantime

We want to not be civilized any longer. It's time to move on. We want to reject crazy hierarchies and delusional economics, colonialism and nation-states. But it just so happens that we aren't given much of a chance to opt out. Civilization has never, not once in its history, allowed room for those who aren't civilized to flourish. It's to the degree that you might think this a defining characteristic of civilization: civilization is so afraid of being wrong that it simply cannot abide by others who live in other fashions.

And even if we did successfully opt out, that wouldn't stop civilization from destroying the earth.

But let's be optimists again for a second. The earth is going to die or the earth is not going to die. Civilization is going to fall, or civilization is not going to fall. What are we going to do, here and now, in our lives?

I don't want to get into how one might get involved in the epic battle to save the earth, to destroy civilization, to prevent or promote the collapse of this or that. Those are the sorts of ethical choices that one must make for oneself.

But I will encourage that you find or develop a post-civilized lifestyle. In a way, it's easy. Close your eyes, and imagine who you would be without social constraints. What would you do if you were dependent upon only yourself, your friends, and the resources you can find around yourself. What would you wear? What would you eat? Perhaps the more important questions are subtler: how would you treat your friends? How would you like to be treated?

Well, that civilization thing was interesting, now wasn't it? I mean, it certainly seemed worth a shot. We got a lot out of it: telescopes, wheelchairs, wikipedia. But we also just about took out the natural world. Science, agriculture, and specialization have done a lot for expanding cultural ideas and communication, but they've done even more for genocide and ecocide.

So it's time we gave up the noble, failed experiment altogether and moved on to something new.

Premise One: We Hate Civilization

This civilization is, from its foundation, unsustainable. It probably cannot be salvaged, and what's more, it would be undesirable to do so. When we're discussing civilization, we're discussing the entirety of the modern world's organizational structures and approaches to culture. We're talking about the legal and societal codes that dictate "proper" behavior. We're talking about the centralizing and expanding urges of political and economic empire.

Civilization is destroying all life on earth. It's unsustainable: growth-based economies and societies always are. Civilization is nigh unredeemable: there seems to be an infinitesimally slim chance that civilization will drop its resource over-consumption and move rapidly towards a sustainable way of existing. And even if it did, we don't want it. It would still be an imposition on our freedom.

Civilization has been defined in all sorts of ways, but none of them actually make it sound very good when you think much about it. My dictionary defines civilization as "the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced." Aside from being a sort of useless definition, this points out the prejudice inherent in civilization. It says: "We are advanced. You are primitive. What's more, history and development is purely lin-

ear in nature, progress only moves forward, and any deviation from the course we are on is regressive.”

Another working definition of civilization can be derived from Wikipedia, which often provides the sort of cultural consensus on a given term. Wikipedia describes civilization as “a society defined as a complex society characterized by the practice of agriculture and settlement in cities ... Compared with less complex structures, members of a civilization are organized into a diverse division of labor and an intricate social hierarchy.” This definition, too, points out the flaws in civilization. An intricate social hierarchy? Why have we all chosen a world that puts up with that kind of crap?

Derrick Jensen, an anti-civilization theorist (but not a post-civilized one), has proposed another useful definition of civilization: “a culture — that is, a complex of stories, institutions, and artifacts — that both leads to and emerges from the growth of cities (civilization, see *civil*: from *civis*, meaning citizen, from Latin *civitatis*, meaning city-state).” Which of course leads us to ask what, exactly, a city is. Derrick defines a city, for the purpose of his definition of civilization, as: “people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life.”

And that, perhaps, is the point of all of this. If a place requires resources from elsewhere, everything is fine when they can trade for them. But when their farming neighbors experience a drought and can’t provide a surplus for trade? Then you have war. Great.

We hate civilization.

Premise Two: We’re Not Primitivists

It is neither possible, nor desirable, to return to a pre-civilized state of being. Most of the groundwork of anti-civilization thought — important work, mind you — vhas been laid down by primitivists. Primitivists believe, by and large, that humanity would be better

abandoned suburbs and herd goats, while a hermit whiles her time growing potatoes in stacked tires and recording classical piano onto wax cylinders.

Someone is going to wire up his Super Nintendo to a solar panel array, and folks from all walks of life are going to come over to play Street Fighter, or just to watch. We’re all going to grow most of our own food, and we’re all going to deal with our own trash, wash our own dishes.

The Collapse

And of course, if we had it our way we would move past civilization as peacefully as possible, as non-destructively as possible. We would organize from the bottom up. We’d present solutions that are so reasonable that those in power with ethics will join us and those without ethics will see their economic might dwindle away as more people refuse to participate in civilized exchange.

But this isn’t likely, to be honest. Our society is on a collision course with history. It’s possible that the only question is which will collapse first: industrial civilization or the earth’s ability to sustain human life. If that’s the case, then we’d better hope (or act) for the former.

The collapse of industrial civilization, if it comes, will be horrible. Not one of us, not even those of us who secretly or openly long for the apocalypse, will enjoy it. But contrary to Hollywood lies, the best in people often comes out in crisis. Nothing brings a neighborhood together like a blackout; nothing gets people to sharing like food shortages. (What, you thought we’d all hoard our food and then duke it out with shotguns, kill or be killed, neighbors setting fire to one another’s houses? Humans don’t always do that. What do you think we are, civilized?)

But if our economy doesn’t give way, and we don’t figure out cold fusion (as well as a massive re-stocking of the world’s oceans),

like today, if you removed the hierarchy between groups and actively avoided the centralizing influence of civilized culture.

Will these groups ever fight? Probably. No system is perfect, and it is better to admit that forthrightly than pretend it is otherwise. We paint no utopia here. But there have been movements in the past that have developed political structures to allow groups with diverse interests to interact peacefully. One of those movements that we are influenced by is syndicalism.

Syndicalism is an economic system totally outside of the capitalist/state-socialist dichotomy. It suggests that a federation of collectivized trade unions might promote mutual aid between members. For a bit of history of when syndicalism successfully functioned in a developed nation, look into the Spanish Civil War.

Mutual aid, then, is the opposite of competition. Wikipedia describes it as “the economic concept of voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit.” One of the earliest anarchists — and evolutionary biologists — was Peter Kropotkin, who advocated against Darwin’s suggestion that nature was simply the war of one against all. Instead, he argued, intra-species cooperation is at least as much an evolutionary force as competition. What’s more, modern science has finally come around and has begun to believe him.

Now, we’re not exactly syndicalists, either. Syndicalism is a lovely idea, but we’re not talking about trade unions, and we’re not talking about industrialization. We should cling to the tenets of historical anarchism no more than we should cling to second-wave feminism, or, for that matter, civilization. No, we’re talking about dynamic groups of people coming together organically to make the few decisions that would impact the non-city at large.

We’re talking about the steampunks over here perfecting solar distilleries by use of Fresnel lenses while another group of bike enthusiasts over there spends their time racing, doing courier work for other groups, and forging bicycles out of found pipe. A semi-nomadic clique of teenagers will move out into the wilds of the

served by returning to a pre-civilized way of life. This is not a view that we share.

Primitivists reject technology. We just reject the inappropriate use of technology. Now, to be fair, that’s almost all of the uses of technology we see in the civilized world. But our issue with most primitivist theory is one of babies and bathwater. Sure, most technologies are being put to rather evil uses — whether warfare or simple ecocide — but that doesn’t make technology (“The application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes.”) inherently evil. It just means that we need to completely re-imagine how we interact with machines, with tools, even with science. We need to determine whether something is useful and sustainable, rather than judging things purely on their economic or military value.

Primitivists reject agriculture. We simply reject monoculture, which is abhorrent and centralizing, destroys regional autonomy, forces globalization on the world, and leads to horrific practices like slash-and-burn farming. We also reject other stupid ideas of how to feed humanity, like setting 6 billion people loose in the woods to hunt and gather. By and large, post-civ folks embrace permaculture: agricultural systems designed from the outset to be sustainable in whatever given area they are developed.

Primitivists have done a good job of exploring the problems of civilization, and for this we commend them. But, on the whole, their critique is un-nuanced.

What’s more, the societal structure they envision, tribalism (note that what our society’s view of what tribalism is is mostly based on faulty, euro-centric anthropology), can be socially conservative: what many tribes lacked in codified law they made up for with rigid “customs,” and one generation is born into the near-exact way of life as their predecessors.

We cannot, *en masse*, return to a pre-civilized way of life. And honestly, most of us don’t want to. We refuse a blanket rejection of everything that civilization has brought us. We need to look forward, not backwards.

We are not primitivists.

Premise Three: We Are Post-Civilized

It is therefore desirable to imagine and enact a post-civilized culture. This is something we can do here and now in the thrashing endgame of civilization.

There are so many false dichotomies in the world. The amateur and the professional musician both have so much to offer, and we post-civilized folks generally cultivate both specialized and generalized skills. Someone has got to get good at lens grinding — and optometry — but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to cook a decent meal, or help weed your neighbor's garden.

One of civilization's greatest faults is its attempt to homogenize a global culture, to spread one set of ideas of how everything — from governance to architecture to agriculture to music — must be done "properly." But if you build flat-roofed houses in cold climates, snow is going to build up and your roof is going to collapse. If you fell trees from a hillside the same as you do in the valleys, your soil is going to erode.

So moving towards post-civilization — with or without industrial collapse — is a matter of looking around oneself, one's community, and one's landbase, and determining what is appropriate. What this means is that, in the here and now, there are parts of civilized culture we can utilize to our benefit that we might not be able to two generations after a collapse. For those in the first world, our most abundant resource is trash.

Good food can be rescued and eaten. Rotten food can be composted and used to build raised bed gardens atop otherwise poisonous city soil. Paper that is blank on one or both sides can be bound into notebooks. Other paper can be pulped in a blender, spread onto screens, and pressed with a repurposed hydraulic car jack. Roadkill can be skinned and butchered. Electric toys can be

scavenged, their circuit boards and motors repurposed. Used vegetable oil can be rescued out of grease traps and used to power our cars or even our generators.

And the critics will say this can't work forever, and they'll look confused when we nod our heads in agreement. Because we'll adapt with the shifting landscape, because what works in one time or place may not work elsewhere or elsewhen.

Civilization thinks that culture naturally trickles down from the civil to the savage, from the urban to the rural. We don't.

We are post-civilized.

If We Had Our Way

What does a city look like if it's not a city anymore? The concept of the city, as an entity of its own with specified boundaries, centralized government, and the routine importation of necessities, must be done away with. But we're not all going to scatter out into the surrounding countryside, oh no.

The post-civilized city (Non-city? Urban area? Terminology is a bit hard.) might look like a city would if you ignored its government. The society would consist of smaller groups that retain their individual identities but are capable of working together for the common good.

We post-civilized aim to prove that decentralization of our culture, economies, and politics is both possible and desirable. Every smaller group (some might use the word tribe, but I personally shy from it) would make its own decisions, maintain its autonomy, and solve problems in the ways that suit its constituency. Some might turn to high technology to meet their needs and desires. Others might live more simply. But the borders between the groups will most likely be blurred, with individuals, groups, and families moving between social spheres. Honestly, it would socially be much