

# **The Anarcho-Primitivist FAQ**

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This is an introduction and exploration of the Anarcho-Primitivist worldview encompassing topics ranging from the beginnings of civilization, technology, its impacts and how a primitivist future might look. We felt as if technology and civilization are taken as an assumed good where more technology is viewed as something positive with very few if any drawbacks. However, having been exposed to Anarcho-Primitivist arguments and literature, learning about how power dynamics and social relationships are imbedded and furthered throughout civilization. We view it with utmost importance to further anti-civilization thought through this short introduction which will hopefully awaken the readers interest to this unique perspective in anarchist thought. Below you will find a short glossary defining important words and concepts used in the FAQ.

## **Glossary**

- Civilization – the logic, institutions, and physical apparatus of domestication, control, and domination.
- Domestication – the will to dominate animals and plants
- Alienation – the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you or that you are not part of a group:
- Paleolithic – the early phase of the Stone Age, lasting about 2.5 million years, when primitive stone implements were used.
- Hunter-gatherer – a member of a society that lives by hunting and collecting wild food, rather than by farming
- Anthropology – the study of human societies and cultures and their development.
- Rewilding – the large-scale restoration of ecosystems
- Deindustrialization – The process of removing or reducing industrial capacity or activity in a country or region.
- Mutual aid – a voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for reciprocal benefit.
- Gift economy – a mode of exchange where valuables are given without an explicit agreement for immediate or future rewards.

## **What is anarchism?**

While there are many different definitions, the two most common ones seem to be:

1. Belief in the abolition of all government and the organization of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion; or
2. Anarchism is a political philosophy and movement that rejects all involuntary, coercive forms of hierarchy.

Both definitions are appropriate and an Anarcho-Primitivist can settle for either-or as all uncivilized societies such as the hunter-gatherers did not have a government or involuntary hierarchies which told them how and in what way to live. Unlike other forms of anarchism, which have no problems with civilization and domestication as a concept, Anarcho-Primitivism serves as the only true anti-systemic current. Opposing all institutions, machines, abstractions and the artificial, because they embody power relations.

## **What is primitivism?**

Primitivism can be used to describe two distinct things. Primitivism can refer to a mode of aesthetic idealization of a “primitive” past, which means any landscape or frame which is viewed as being natural or uncivilized. This type of primitivism relates to the visual arts. Primitivism or Anarcho-Primitivism is a social movement critiquing the origins and supposed progress of civilization.

## **What do Anarcho-Primitivists want exactly?**

This varies as not all Anarcho-Primitivists are alike, however, they all agree that civilization as it is now must be abolished. A few are in favor of returning to a hunter-gatherer past whilst some would like to take part of its wisdom, such as its radical egalitarianism, gift economy, peace and well-being, and do away with argued shortcomings such as the formation of symbolic culture in the upper Paleolithic times as for instance expressed through art.

A typical day in hunter-gatherer societies would revolve around gathering and preparing food, sharing it with your fellow tribesmen ranging anywhere from 5–60 people and spending the rest of your day with friends and family in a strong community who generally want the best for each other.

To quote the Primitivist Primer, “The aim is to develop a synthesis of primal and contemporary anarchy, 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, merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Do they have a method or strategy of getting the desired outcome?**

There is no unanimously agreed upon strategy or method of abolishing civilization. Some believe that we should strive towards reform, whilst others believe that organizing and fighting against civilization is needless and hence a waste of time.

Still, some believe in locally organizing and trying to do your best living separate from civilization (which of course won't be 100% achievable). There are numerous other methods and strategies, some of which involve violence against property, which I won't expand on here.

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<sup>1</sup> Primitivist Primer

## **Isn't primitivism utopian?**

No, primitive societies are not perfect and problems do exist, such as a high infant mortality rate. However, without diseases it is estimated that hunter-gatherers can live to approximately 70 years of age.<sup>2</sup> Someone living to the age of 90 in a hyper competitive and alienated where individuals are cogs in a machine, will live a different life than a hunter-gatherer who is a valued in a close community whose emotional and physical needs are typically cared for due mutual aid being practiced. This I would argue is a fair trade off where quality of life rather than age matters.

## **Will people be properly fed without agriculture?**

Most likely. Historical and archaeological evidence shows hunter-gatherers to be lean, fit, and largely free from signs and symptoms of chronic diseases. When hunter-gatherer societies transitioned to an agricultural grain based diet, their general health deteriorated. They also had less famine than agriculturalists, demonstrating that agriculture is not necessary to have a stable food supply.<sup>3</sup>

In a modern context, however, this would depend largely on the region and skills the individuals have. Without large scale rewilding and deindustrialization, returning to such a life would be very difficult as there wouldn't be much to gather, other than the processed and chemically engineered food from the stores. As anthropologist Mark N. Cohen said, "agriculture is not easier than hunting and gathering and does not provide a higher quality, more palatable, or even more secure food base."<sup>4</sup>

## **Will people die of preventable diseases and lack of adequate healthcare?**

People will always die of preventable diseases and healthcare will always lack to some extent. It is partially true that the advancement of medicine has increased the general life expectancy and created treatments and cures for preventable diseases.

However, this ignores the fact that domestication has led to a massive amplification of certain preventable illnesses and disorders, such as anxiety and depression due to a lack of perceived purpose and interpersonal relationships people have. A study showed that the number of people with no friends tripled between 1985 and 2004.<sup>5</sup> Of course this can't entirely be blamed on technology, but the replacement of real life interaction with the artificial ones through social media which isolates and alienates individuals from nature and their community has certainly contributed.

Obesity is another large issue which overproduction and overconsumption leads to. There will most likely be certain diseases which would rise and become more dangerous than may have been in civilization. Modern medicine largely aims to treat symptoms through prescribing people

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<sup>2</sup> McCauley, B. "Life Expectancy in Hunter-Gatherers." 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Berbesque, J. et al. "Hunter-gatherers have less famine than agriculturalists." 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, M. *The Food Crisis in Prehistory: Overpopulation and the Origins of Agriculture*. 1977. Pg. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bryner, J. "Close Friends Less Common Today, Study Finds." 2011.

chemical compounds rather than by treating the issues directly. Primitive society would instead deal with a lot of the causes, through maintaining an active and fulfilling lifestyle where people have a sense of belonging and purpose in their community as they strive towards maximizing their potential in a free environment.<sup>6</sup>

## **Do Anarcho-Primitivists reject technology that is already available?**

Yes. A distinction must be made between simple tools and technology. To once again quote the Primitivist Primer, “tools are creations on a localized, small-scale, the products of either individuals or small groups on specific occasions. As such, they do not give rise to systems of control and coercion. Technology, on the other hand, is the product of large-scale interlocking systems of extraction, production, distribution and consumption, and such systems gain their own momentum and dynamic.”

Technology in all its forms carries inevitable alienation and sets up a system where we need “experts” above us to guide us in some way. A cell phone, for instance, is something that nearly no one would be able to make on their own. This alienates us further by relying on an “expert” to have immense power over the average individual, which has led to many problems in the past. For instance, the Facebook privacy leaks in 2018 and the dozens of companies selling your information to others which no repercussions or consent.

Research has shown that hours of screen time is associated with lower well-being in young people. It is also important to note that researchers agree that that modern populations are increasingly overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, sleep-deprived, and socially-isolated.<sup>7</sup> Technology does not solve everything and it often creates more problems than it solves!

## **Aren't Anarcho-Primitivists hypocrites for using technology?**

A lot of thinkers have different views on this. Zerzan argues that indeed it is hypocritical to use technology however it is necessary to impact and further the discussion in favor of an anti-civilization perspective. He would deem it a necessary evil to use technology.

However, it could also be argued that it is virtuous and not an obligation to forgo the use of technology and to not participate in the system of human domestication. It is unreasonable to expect every individual who accepts anti-civilization thought to give up their livelihoods to be perfectly virtuous. This is comparable to how it is good to give to charity, although unreasonable to expect that everyone you interact with should donate \$50 to charity.

All consumption is unethical, whether it's buying a t-shirt, which indirectly funds immoral activities conducted by large corporations, or food coming from animals which are unnecessarily killed. So, some Anarcho-Primitivists are probably hypocritical for using technology to the level that they do, a lot however try to do their best to live in a way that avoids having to interact with it.

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<sup>6</sup> Rose, D. Allen, R. *Ancient Civilizations of the World*. 2018. Pg. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Hidaka, B. “Depression as a disease of modernity: explanations for increasing prevalence.” 2012.

## **How would disabled people function in a more “primitive” society?**

It depends on how “disabled” the person is. If, for example, an individual has just lost a leg, they could function in a way that allows them the benefit of receiving the necessary resources without having to actively gather and hunt themselves. Perhaps taking a more nurturing role and taking care of children and young people, while others may be looking for food, could be a way that disabled individuals could function in a more primitive society. Although some disabilities exist where individuals are kept alive using devices such as ventilators.

There are two different approaches to those kinds of issues. Some would cite the overpopulation of humanity and form strict opposition to any form of technology as a reason why these devices should not exist in a more primitive society. Depending on the disability, their lifetime may be shorter than others, though hopefully their life would be more meaningful and greater in quality than that of the average person today.

The other approach would be to retain some low levels of medical devices to artificially keep alive or alleviate pain to individuals that are vulnerable. It is a fact that since 1980, the global economy has grown by 380%, but the number of people living in poverty on less than \$5 a day has increased by more than 1.1 billion.<sup>8</sup> The person who hates life wishes to encourage birth rates to grow exponentially making the amount of people suffer increase.. The person who wants the best for humanity wishes for the birth rate to decline.

## **What would prevent people from creating civilization again?**

The sufficient knowledge that domestication of nature, humans and other animals, has been a disaster and hence should never be tried again. Anarcho-Primitivists don’t strive towards forcing people to be part of a community that they do not wish to be a part of. If they wish to change how the community functions, they would be expelled and if they and others want to create civilization, they are knowingly arguing for the domination and subordination of nature and its resources to humanity.

It can be argued that this goes against a reasonable ethical standard of opposing the degradation and exploitation of the environment and other sentient beings, in which preventative measures as enacted by the Luddites during the industrial revolution in England are justified to prevent them from doing so. Or the view can be held that as long as it does not adversely impact your local community it should be their right to pursue that path.

## **What would prevent a stronger group from taking over a weaker group?**

As history shows, it is impossible to completely eradicate the existence of war or group conflict, as some groups might want to have more than other groups. Incidentally, today’s civilization furthers this urge. When we have a phone or enough food, social media and advertising creates these false images which tell us that we should want more unhealthy food or the newest phone,

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<sup>8</sup> Hickel, J. “Forget ‘developing’ poor countries, it’s time to ‘de-develop’ rich countries.” 2015.

to further our consumerist urges, making the average person even more domesticated and a slave to their desires. So the case must be made that in a primitive society there would be less conflict.<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed the case as anthropologists and other researchers of the Paleolithic era demonstrate that there were extremely low levels of warfare due to the lack of sedentism as hunter-gatherers were on the move and usually found what they needed. Mutual aid and a gift economy will prevent unnecessary conflict, as people would work together to provide for the most amount of people's needs as shown in hunter-gatherer societies.<sup>10</sup> They rejected unjust hierarchical rule by an individual who told the many what to do and consume.

## **Aren't people happier in civilization?**

No. There is a lot of research on happiness and human well-being and how it relates to civilization. Prior to civilization, there generally existed ample leisure time, considerable gender equality and social equality, a non-destructive and decontrolling approach to the natural world, the absence of organized violence, no mediating or formal institutions, and strong health and robustness. Civilization inaugurated mass warfare, the subjugation of women, population growth, busy work, concepts of property, entrenched hierarchies, as well as encouraging the spread of disease through globalization.

One could go into the detail on how social media increases aggression and creates a false sense of expectation for people, making them feel more alienated and disconnected from a perceived happiness that society actually lacks to an indescribable extent. Or you could point to dozens of examples demonstrating that our alienated, domesticated, hierarchically organized, and socially discriminatory society is not good enough.

To quote Zerzan, "Paleolithic, devices for social cohesion were unnecessary; division of labor, separate roles, and territoriality seem to have been largely non-existent. As tensions and anxieties started to emerge in social life, art and the rest of culture arose with them in answer to their disturbing presence."

## **Wasn't civilization made for good reason?**

Civilization began in the agricultural revolution which brought about a lot of the miseries that we have today. How and why agriculture began is a hotly debated topic in the anthropological community. Some falsely argue that civilization came about to prevent food shortages. This however has been rejected and argued against extensively by leading researchers, such as geographer Carl Sauer who observed that "agriculture did not originate from a growing or chronic shortage of food."<sup>11</sup> Gebauer and Price go further to state that "rather than the result of external forces and stress, the adoption of domestication may well have been an internally motivated process."<sup>12</sup>

This has led to numerous interesting theories on how agriculture domestication came about. Another theory is that religion was the originating factor of civilization as sheep and goats were originally used for rituals and hence were domesticated so that they can be used as a sacrifice.

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, B. Wood, B. Anthropology. 2006. Pg. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Bataille, G. The Tears of Eros. 1989. Pg. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Koyama, S. Thomas, D. Affluent Foragers. 1982. Pg. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Gebauer, A. Price, T. Transitions to Agriculture in Prehistory. 1992. Pg. 6.



Although religion partially plays a role, Zerzan goes further and argues that agriculture and production arose due to “that non-rational, cultural force of alienation which spread, in the forms of time, language, number and art, to ultimately colonize material and psychic life in agriculture.”<sup>13</sup>

To simplify, symbolic culture is Zerzan’s argued reason why civilization came about. Symbolic culture is the element of human culture that is based on semiotic representations of the world in which we live. Included in “symbolic culture” would necessarily be art, music, numbers, but also language itself. Symbolic culture inhibits human communication by blocking and otherwise suppressing channels of sensory awareness. An increasingly technological existence compels us to tune out most of what we could experience.

Freud, Marcuse, and other thinkers saw that civilization demands the sublimation or repression of the pleasures of the proximity senses so that the individual can be thus converted to an instrument of labor.<sup>14</sup> Social control, via the network of the symbolic, very deliberately disempowers the body.<sup>15</sup> This would lead us to believe that civilization was not made for good reasons but rather the opposite, culture adapts in ways to make individuals docile further leading to a sedentary and “lazy” existence where people live in the abstract rather than in the moment.

## **Where can I read more about Anarcho-Primitivist thought?**

Here is an extensive reading list (not composed by me) which will in detail expand on the Anarcho-Primitivist worldview and its surrounding components. I owe most of my knowledge to John Zerzan which is why I highly recommend books and talks online from him.

1. Green Anarchism: Towards the Abolition of Hierarchy – Corin Bruce
2. Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex – Indigenous Action
3. A Primitivist Primer – John Moore
4. Anarchy and Ecstasy – John Moore
5. Anarchist Speculations – John Moore
6. Walden – Henry David Thoreau
7. Industrial Society and it’s Future – Ted Kaczynski
8. Anti-Tech Revolution why and how – Ted Kaczynski
9. Technological Slavery – Ted Kaczynski
10. Ishmael – Dan Quinn
11. Against the Grain – James C Scott
12. Art of Not Being Governed – James C Scott

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<sup>13</sup> Zerzan, J. Against Civilization. 1999. Pg. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Zerzan, J. Running on Emptiness. 2002. Pg. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Zerzan, J. Running on Emptiness. 2002. Pg. 11.

13. Desert – Anonymous
14. Running on Emptiness – John Zerzan
15. Twilight of the Machines – John Zerzan
16. Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections – John Zerzan
17. Why Hope? The stand against civilization – John Zerzan
18. Elements of Refusal – John Zerzan
19. Future Primitive – John Zerzan
20. The Iron Grip of Civilization in the axial age – John Zerzan
21. The Mass Psychology of Misery – John Zerzan
22. Star Trek – John Zerzan
23. The Origins of War – John Zerzan
24. New York, New York – John Zerzan
25. Patriarchy, Civilization, And The Origins Of Gender – John Zerzan
26. The Original Affluent Society – Marshall Sahlins
27. Stone Age Economics – Marshall Sahlins
28. Endgame – Derrick Jensen
29. The Myth of Human Supremacy by Derrick Jensen
30. Welcome to the Machine – Derrick Jensen
31. What We Leave Behind – Derrick Jensen and Aric McBay
32. Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality – Christopher Ryan
33. Continuum Concept – Jean Liedloff
34. The Technological Society – Jacques Ellul
35. Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes – Jacques Ellul
36. Our hunter-gatherer future: Climate change, agriculture and uncivilization – John Gowdy
37. Domestication, and Social Foundation: Narratives of Civilization and Wilderness – Layla AbdelRahim
38. Wild Children – Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education – Layla AbdelRahim

39. Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers by Richard Lee
40. For Wildness and Anarchy by Kevin Tucker
41. Against His-story! Against Leviathan! – Fredy Perlman
42. Against Domestication – Jacques Camatte
43. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow – Yuval Noah Harari
44. Thirty Theses – Jason Godesky
45. Rise like Lions – Anonymous
46. The Ascent of Humanity by Charles Eisenstein
47. 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance – Gord Hill
48. Growing up Absurd – Paul Goodman
49. The Monkey Wrench Gang – Edward Abbey
50. Limits to Growth: 30 Year Update – Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers
51. Seven Lies About Civilization – Ran Prieur
52. The Age of Batshit Crazy Machines – Ran Prieur
53. A Rewilding Community Toolbox V – Nikanoru
54. The Consequences of Domestication and Sedentism – Emily A. Schultz & Robert H. Lavenda
55. A Lesson in Earth Civics – Chellis Glendinning
56. The Collapse of Complex Societies – Joseph Tainter
57. Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines – Richard Heinberg
58. Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences – Edward Tenner
59. Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology – Neil Postman
60. Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder – Bob Black
61. Why the Future Doesn't Need Us – Bill Joy
62. Technofix: Why Technology Won't Save Us or the Environment Hoyce Huesemann and Michael Huesemann
63. Bushcraft 101 – Dave Canterbury
64. SAS Survival Handbook – Lofty Wiseman

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