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Letters to Freedom on Primitivism

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March 3, 2009

Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from
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A few years back **Freedom** let the primitivists of **Wildfire** have a page to discuss their ideas. These letters were written in response to their articles. **Wildfire**, as far as I am aware, is no more — it's two members went their separate ways quite soon after they stopped writing for **Freedom**.

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response by WC to criticism, it seems obvious to conclude that while “diehard red and blackers” could meet the “challenge” of “primitivism,” the “primitivists” could not meet the challenge of anarcho-communist critiques.

Which probably explains their quickness to smear their opponents. I’m not surprised that they accused the editors of having (sinister sounding) “editorial ambitions.” Accusing other anarchists of power seeking is a common refrain by them (they accused me of wanting to become a “politician” because I supported traditional libertarian organisation). Far easier to besmirch the intentions of others than address their criticisms.

All in all, WC proved to be a distinct disappointment. I had hoped for a chance to debate (the limitations of) “primitivism” but, sadly, they avoided that like the plague. I do hope that the “Green and Black Bulletin” will continue without WC. As I said from the start, no modern form of anarchism is complete without being green. Freedom must cover ecological issues and struggles and the Bulletin could be the means of doing that in depth. Freed from the dogma of “primitivism” it could become a valuable feature of Freedom. I hope so.

And who knows, perhaps one day WC will finally get round to addressing the flaws of primitivism myself and others have highlighted in these pages. Hopefully the bulletin will be there for them to (finally!) reply in.

Iain

blame and having made “consistent attempts to sabotage the page have succeeded in our withdrawal.”

However, their specific reasons seem to smack of the “infantilism” they accuse the editors of. After all, what do they object to? Censorship? No, they did not like the “layout” of their last article. And why did the editors of Freedom lay it out? Because not only were the WC unable to write anything new, they could not be bothered to lay it out either. And how did the layout “sabotage” it. By including a picture of the world’s most famous (fictional) barbarian to illustrate an article which urged the barbarians to “break loose”? Or was it the humorous caption beneath it? Or the word “Hmmm...” in the subtitle?

Is the “primitivist” message really so weak that it cannot survive these minor additions? And does it mean that if the Freedom editors had included a picture of, say, Genghis Khan, and removed “Hmmm...” we would still be getting the Bulletin? For some reason I doubt it.

And what of their last bulletin? Did they take the opportunity to address some of the concerns raised by readers of Freedom about their ideas? No, they did not. For all their talk of debate, WC consistently refused to partake in any. They never once answered the “well-argued criticism” they said they received. We did, of course, get two letters, crammed with the “vitriolic attacks” they accuse their opponents of and which singularly failed to answer the serious criticisms made by others (including myself). After that, silence. So could their decision to stop be related to this, their inability to answer the telling criticisms of their flawed ideology?

As such, it is probably wise that they proclaimed that they did not seek “convert” other anarchists, but rather to “cause a stir and challenge” those with ideas from “1930’s anarcho-communism.” While I do find it funny when “primitivists” accuse others of living in the past, it says a lot about their politics that they admit that they did not think they could convince other anarchists of its validity. Given the lack of

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actually discuss how to get there, I'll be unable to sign up to it. Perhaps the reason why they don't do this is because they know that it will involve all the things they slag off "traditional" anarchists for. In other words, a process of transition involving workers' control, federalism and the use of industry. Also, if they admit to that they would also have to acknowledge that "traditional" anarchists do not want the "continuation of industrial society" at all but rather a total transformation of how we live. We just recognise this cannot be done overnight nor need involve the elimination of all forms of industry/technology.

I'm glad she says I may be "happier and more satisfied living" in her utopia, after all she does not give me any other options to choose from. The idea that we can choose the level of technology we want is dismissed out of hand. Without irony, she says that it is "industrialism" that "removes the choice for people to decide how to live" and so condemns us all to live under primitivism. Saying that there is no alternative does seem a little bit authoritarian to me, sorry. Particularly when the use of appropriate technology shows it's not true.

Iain McKay

Last letter to Freedom on Primitivism

Dear *Freedom*

I cannot say that I was too heart-broken to see that the Wild-fire Collective (WC) has decided to stop submitting its bulletin to Freedom. I did think of letting the last bulletin go without comment, but the nature of their last contribution provoked me to write.

Why have they decided to stop? They are vague on this, so implying so sort of conspiracy by the new Freedom editors to silence them. Apparently "editorial-infantilism" by "junior editors" seeking "to stamp their own agenda on the paper" is to

Then there is the whole issue of (to quote the first “Green and Black Bulletin”) when “civilisation collapses” through “its own volition.” Now, that can only mean one thing. It means the destruction of life as we know it in a short period of time, whether we want it or not. Primitivists, when pressed, seem to say that they don’t mean instant chaos and mass starvation by that expression but that is what it sounds like. And they get huffy when you point it out!

Karen shows this contradiction between the rhetoric and reality. She says I raise an important issue “of how people could manage nuclear and toxic waste caused by decades of military and industrial production.” She suggests “skilled people to contain the legacy of industrialism or to allow them to degrade as safely as possible in areas that people can avoid.” So, to get this right, no one will want to work in a mine or in a factory but they *will* want to look after toxic and nuclear waste? And how will they do that? Both bulletins rejected workers’ control out of hand. And it will require technology and industry to provide the means of containment, but that is (yet again) rejected out of hand. So, how will this task be done? As for dumping it into one area, surely Karen knows that the environment cannot be subdivided in this way. The effects of a rotting pile of industrial waste will not stop at human made barriers.

The key problem with Karen’s reply is that it does not address the pretty basic question of how we get to her primitivist utopia. She talks about “small-scale land-based cultures” yet does not explain how the UK will support 58 million people living like that. Nor how we get there. The very crux of my critique, incidentally. And which none of the “primitivists” have bothered to acknowledge, never mind address.

Given that primitivists reject workers’ control, federalism, the “continuation of industrial society” (even temporarily), and so forth, I fail to see how it will ever happen without starvation and misery on a massive scale. Perhaps “primitivism” will be as wonderful as Karen says it will be but until she and her fellows

Critique of Green and Black Bulletin no. 1

Dear Freedom

I was disappointed in the first the “*Green and Black Bulletin.*” This is not because I am against Freedom covering ecological issues. No, far from it. A regular column on green issues would benefit Freedom immensely. I know that anarchism and ecology are intertwined and that any relevant and decent form of anarchism *must* be rooted in an ecological perspective.

No, the reason I have reservations about this Bulletin is two fold. Firstly, it proclaims it will be a “primitivist” column, thus excluding most forms of ecological anarchism. To suggest that anarcho-primitivism *is* “*green anarchism*” is blinkered, not to mention sectarian and downright false. Secondly, the first bulletin does not enfuse me with confidence that the column will have anything positive to say about eco-anarchism or, indeed, anarchism. I know it is early days, but to start off attacking other anarchists as being “reformist” and proclaiming it is a case of “anarcho-primitivism versus anarchism” does not bode well for the future.

As an example, Moore asserts that “classical anarchism” simply wants to “rework” modern society and “remove its worst abuses and oppressions” leaving “99% of life ... unchanged.” So the “worst abuses and oppressions” of capitalism account for just 1% of life! Which sounds like the comment an apologist of capitalism would make. He also has little belief in the creative abilities of the bulk of the population. He seems to think that people who went to the trouble of smashing the state and kicking the bosses out would stop there, leaving industry and technology unchanged and that workers will continue doing the same sort of work, in the same way, using the same methods! In other words, it is not enough to get rid of the boss, although this is a necessary first step!

So, “classical anarchists” doubt that many of the workers who use technology and work in industry will leave either

unchanged (see, for example, Kropotkin's **Conquest of Bread**). Rather, they will seek to liberate the technology they use from the distorting influences of capitalism, just as they liberated themselves. This will take time, of course, and be an imperfect process (but, then again, primitivists seem somewhat impatient, subscribing to what Kropotkin rightly dismissed as a harmful fallacy, namely the idea of a one-day revolution). Moore simply distorts the ideas of "classical anarchism" by his assertions.

On a different issue, looking at the arguments in the bulletin I am struck by how vague "anarcho-primitivism" is. For example, John Moore states that the "kind of world envisaged by anarcho-primitivism is one unprecedented in human experience" and that "there are no hard-and-fast rules" in getting there. In other words, we don't know what we want nor how we get there! Even worse, he states that "there can't be any limits on the forms of resistance and insurgency that might develop." Whatever happened to the anarchist principle that means shape the ends? That means there *are* "limits" on tactics, as some tactics are not and can never be libertarian. More on this later.

And I cannot help thinking that all this talk of "Civilisation" lets the ruling class off the hook for our and the planet's problems, as it is "technology" and "mass society" which is blamed (the capitalist class can rest easy – injustice, authority, oppression, ecocide, etc. are not their fault, they are simply the inevitable result of "mass society"!). Rather than seeing power originating in socio-economic relationships, it is rooted in "the machine." Which, ironically, is the mirror image of Engels' argument in "On Authority." For Engels, technology meant freedom was impossible during production. He wanted to keep technology and dump autonomy. Primitivists want to dump technology, suggesting that the comments on workers' control being "workers' self-exploitation" have more in common in classical Marxism than classical anarchism.

the liar. I will not hold my breath waiting for an apology for his distortions and lies. But at least WC have shown that they have no concern for the truth or discussing the problems a social revolution will face. Or, more importantly, the fate of the 58 million people of the UK under "primitivism."

Iain McKay

Another letter to Freedom on Primitivism

Dear *Freedom*

Karen Goaman's summary of my ideas (issue 10/1/04) is at such odds to what I actually wrote I don't know where to begin. Perhaps it is just me, but it often seems that supporters of primitivism speak a different language to the rest of us. After all, I said in my first reply that I doubted that people who went to the trouble of having a revolution would leave everything pretty much the same as before (as asserted in the first "Green and Black Bulletin"). But, no, apparently by this I meant the opposite! So when she labels me a lover of "modern industrial society" she is distorting my position slightly.

Then there is the whole "primitivist" rhetoric itself. The first Bulletin stressed primitivism was "not posing the Stone Age as a model for our Utopia." Now Karen points to "only 150,000 years of our own pre-history" as "models and examples"! She stresses that the "small-scale land-based cultures" primitivism wants are not peasant communities (although she also says that "peasants and small farmers" were what "the Wildfire writers argue for"!), which leaves us with the "gathering and hunting" tribes the first Bulletin rejected. So to recap. Primitivists don't want to go back to the Stone Age, they just imply they do. They also consider peasant life a "return to a life of drudgery," but also "argue for" it. Which, I suppose, shows that Zerzan was right to combat the evils of language!

tivism rejects “that models of social interaction be imposed on anyone” yet fails to discuss how to get to his primitivist utopia. He wants to get rid of the city, yet makes no attempt to explain how nor what will happen to London’s 8 million inhabitants. Given that neither primitivist bothered to answer the question of how the UK will support 58 million people using such a culture, I have wonder why WF1 complains that it is false to say he “propose[s] ‘mass starvation’ as a solution”! May I remind WC of their first bulletin’s comment about when “civilisation collapses”? What conclusion *should* we draw?

Until WC answers such questions, no one will take them seriously. The fact that they refused to take this opportunity to do so is significant. Will they fail to answer the equally simple question of how they plan to deactivate industry safely and avoid mass starvation without the workers’ control, international links and federal organisation they dismiss out of hand as new forms of “governance”?

It is simple. We are faced with the fact that a revolution will start in society as it is. Anarchism recognises this and suggests a means of transforming it. Primitivism shies away from such minor problems. In spite of extremist sounding rhetoric, it has no revolutionary perspective at all and, consequently, little to recommend it.

Finally, I had to laugh when WF1 said my “longstanding battle with ‘primitivism’ has been well documented.” He states that the “letter pages of past issues of Black Flag and Green Anarchists are littered with ‘calls and responses’ similar to these.” Clearly WF1 is as bad at documentation as he is with honest debate or getting quotes right. I have *never* written a letter to Green Anarchist nor a word in Black Flag about primitivism.

But why let the truth get in the way? It hasn’t so far. WF1 states that I have “exposed [my] potential to misrepresent and lie to secure some obscure ‘ideological’ battle.” Given his utter distortion of my arguments and his seeming inability to get even simple quotes correct, I know who has been exposed as

This is not the only convergence with Marxism, since primitivism seems to share with Leninism an objectivist vision of social change. For Leninists, it is the economic crisis that puts “socialism” (i.e. state capitalism) on the agenda, similarly for the primitivists it is when “civilisation collapses” through “its own volition.” Perhaps this is because they know that the mass of people who, quite rightly, view their utopia with horror. After all, Moore does not explain how the UK could feed nearly 60 million people by primitivist (i.e. hunting and gathering) means (and let us not forget one of the editors of *Green Anarchist* did say they would prefer “mass starvation” to “mass government,” i.e. existing — “mass” — society). Perhaps this explains why, according to Moore, primitivism does not “seek to ... win converts.” Why bother, when society will collapse and people will not have a choice? The idea of anarchism as being created from below, by the conscious desires of the oppressed for freedom and justice is missing.

What of Moore’s comments that civilisation may, perhaps, collapse “through our own efforts” and that only “widespread refusal ...can abolish civilisation”? He does not explain how this can be achieved, if you do not seek “converts” (i.e. convince people of your ideas). Given that he argues that “daily life” is marked by “internalised patterns of obedience,” it suggests that by “our” he means primitivists, not the classical anarchist idea of a revolt by the people. He talks of “communities of resistance,” yet does not root them in the workplace or the neighbourhood and so the practical concerns of most people. Wildfire concurs, dismissing “workers’ councils, committees” out of hand while, apparently, subscribing to Moore’s idea of “interdependent” communities. How such communities would communicate, never mind work together, without federal organisations is left unasked, never mind unanswered!

So dismissing the mass of the population (i.e. the working class) as an agent of change leaves primitivism with two options. Either wait for the “inevitable collapse of civilisa-

tion” (and wile-away the hours slagging other anarchists off as reformists) or embrace eco-vanguardism and celebrate any form of “resistance” which may bring the glorious day forward. This reached its logical conclusion when “**Green Anarchist**” supported the actions and ideas of the (non-anarchist) Unabomber and published an article stating that the “*the Oklahoma bombers had the right idea. The pity was that they did not blast any more government offices...The Tokyo sarin cult had the right idea. The pity was that in testing the gas a year prior to the attack they gave themselves away.*” A subsequent exchange of letters in **Anarchy** magazine saw one “**Green Anarchist**” editor justify this sick, authoritarian nonsense as simply examples of “*unmediated resistance*” conducted “*under conditions of extreme repression.*” Which makes you ask “resistance” to what, exactly? Working people? Are they the enemy? Perhaps, given Moore’s comments about the mass of people internalising obedience.

As I said above, no anarchist can talk about “any” means of “resistance and insurgency” being valid. Libertarian ends require libertarian means. Perhaps I am reading too much into the reprinting of Moore’s article, but given the legacy of its original publication place (**Green Anarchist**) it suggests a fatal unwillingness to learn from the mistakes of the past and an equally fatal unwillingness to develop anarcho-primitivist theory in a way to avoid these authoritarian pitfalls “**Green Anarchist**” so helpfully and unintentionally exposed in it. Perhaps future “Green and Black” Bulletin’s will address the kinds of issues I’ve raised here, while opening itself up to contributions from other kinds of eco-anarchists. I hope so, but we will see.

yours in solidarity,
Iain

tionary situation, without having to continue their production post-revolution.” Why didn’t I think of that? No, wait, I *did!* I wrote that “we will need to handle such problems while transforming society” as well as “evaluating the costs and benefits of specific concrete forms of technology and production, seeking ways of improving and changing them and, perhaps, getting rid of some of them totally.” WF1 simply repeats *my* point against me. How dishonest can you get?

Strangely, WF1 does not explain how this deactivation would occur. As he dismisses workers’ control, I cannot see how it will be done. The issue is simple. If WC think “primitivist” society will exist immediately, then they must acknowledge that millions will die of starvation so that the “lucky” few that survive can raise chickens free from such tyrannies as hospitals, books and electricity. If, however, they think it will be created over time, with the sensible deactivation of industry and the voluntary dismantling of cities like London then let them explain how this will be done without the workers’ control, international links and the self-organisation of the population they attacked me for advocating. And if the transition is slow, then why can we not judge which technology to keep/modify/reject rather than just dump it all?

But that isn’t an option for WC, who denounced me for suggesting it. They made it clear that it was a case of when “civilisation collapses” rather than progressive change over time. Given this, they *must* explain why such a sudden breakdown will not lead to the death and ecological destruction on a massive scale. If they claim, against all logic, they do not want such an abrupt change, then why do their bulletins so obviously suggest they do?

But logic does not seem to be their strong point. WF1’s comrade states that the bulletin is not “a blue print for the future.” So when it argued for “small scale land-based culture” it was *not* proposing any ideas for the future? He asserts that primi-

majority want.” This is ironic. Is he now suggesting that we *should* let people “harness nuclear energy” as it would be oppressive to try and convince them not to? I wish he would make his mind up! He then ends this self-contradictory paragraph with an assertion that “when the boycotts fail” I would “be out shooting all these ‘anti-work’ types his Spanish civil war heroes” did. I notice he provided no evidence for this serious claim. I checked the most obvious source for such an accusation (Seidmen’s “**Workers Against Work**”) and found nothing. Perhaps he would furnish a reference?

Then there is WF1’s distortion on my handling ecologically destructive technology. He again produces a doctored, out of context, quote in order to launch into a tirade on how I think “the future is an either or scenario. Either we embrace ecological destruction or face ecological destruction.” Perhaps I should stress that by “ecological destruction” I assumed WC meant the use of natural resources by humans (this is clear from my letter). Given the context they used the term, I feel justified in this. Yes, producing any product, even ecological ones, will result in resource use, pollution, and so on (i.e. be destructive of the natural environment). This applies to “primitivist” society as well. Cutting down trees for homes, heating and farm land causes “ecological destruction.” My starting point is how do we interact with the environment to minimise our impact while maintaining a decent standard of living. As I made clear in my letter, as WF1 knows.

WC clearly reject this solution. I can see why WF1 distorts my position as it allows him to ignore my point, which was that “the breakdown of civilisation WF desires” will face the “legacies of industrial society, which (like the ruling class) will not just disappear.” Presumably WF1 rejects this and thinks that nuclear power stations should just be allowed to melt down and the toxic wastes of decaying industrial society just seep into the water table and soil? But no, he argues that “we can safely deactivate and secure ‘toxic’ processes during a revolu-

Critique of Green and Black Bulletin no. 2

Dear *Freedom*

I’m not surprised that the article “*Mass Society*” was not signed by the member of the “Wildfire Collective” who penned it. I, too, would be ashamed of putting my name to such nonsense. Strong words, I know, but justified given the self-contradictory and superficial arguments this article inflicts on its readers.

Our anonymous comrade (whom I will call WF) seems to have taken all the traditional arguments *against* anarchism and turned them into arguments *for* “primitivism.” “Anarchism cannot work in complex societies”? Correct. “Organisation equals government”? Of course. “Society equals the state”? You bet! “Modern society requires bureaucracy.” Indeed. “No one will work”? Right! How depressing reading an anarchist confirm all the common prejudices against anarchism.

And the alternative? That is not defined but in the “immediate term” we get “small scale land-based culture,” based on the smallest group possible. I doubt many people in the West will embrace this return to peasant life. Rather, they would embrace the inequalities and oppression of capitalism and statism, given the alternative. With enemies like these, the current system really does not need friends!

Then there is the incredible level of self-contradiction. WF opines that “why should people’s actions be defined by the resources they live near” yet fails to recognise that the small-scale groups they favour will, by necessity, be defined so. It is asserted that “no community would be beholden to any other” while talking about “our shared future world.” But such groups need not share anything, unless they have something “defined by the resources they live near” which others do not. Then they would “be beholden to an external need,” which is bad. And WF talks about “establishing a truly global classless human re-

lations” while making communication beyond a few days walk impossible! Which makes their opposition to “cultural Pangea” quite ironic: their “small groups” will only see the few “cultures” nearest them.

Then there is their wondering of “who’s going down the mine.” They answer “Me? No thanks!” Ironically, WF does not offer that option to those who do not wish to live in self-sufficient small groups. Even more ironically WF refuses those in the “global south” any choice in what kind of society they want while also arguing that *other* anarchists seek a similar bland globalised world as capitalism and cannot see beyond the “western model.” Indeed, a successful anarchist revolution in the west would be imperialist, “export[ing ‘civilisation’] to these denied its ‘wonders.’” But perhaps this exposes an awareness that people in the “majority world” do *not* particularly *like* many aspects of their lives and seek improvements (e.g. clean water and basic medicines) in their living conditions? As for the level of technology and industry they would like, well, I think true anarchists should let them decide that themselves rather than seeking to impose primitivist fantasies onto them.

So WFs vision of the future is as contradictory as it is unappealing. What of their critique of traditional anarchism? That, too, is lacking. Talking of London, WF argues that “if the city stays” then it “cannot and will not be anarchist” due to the size of the population and the resources and organisation required. In return, I ask, how will WF get rid of London? WF claims that organising a city the size of London would be “a fucking nightmare” yet singularly fails to talk about the real fucking nightmare of what will happen to these 8 million people? Why should they leave the city? How? Where to? Can all 8 million, never mind the other 50 million, attempt to live the life “primitivism” asserts is in their interests to live on these islands?

If London “stays” WF wonders if “those in the ‘countryside’ still have to provide food for the beast”? By “the beast” I as-

of Freedom are stupid? They read my reply and know I said no such thing. The “quote” you provide was my repeating *your* straw man argument against “traditional” anarchism and most definitely *not* suggesting agreement with your dishonest comments! The context makes it clear that this was the case, as can be seen by WF1 doctoring the quote to remove the quotation marks where I indicated the second bulletin’s words. How dishonest can you get?

As regards WF1’s puerile comments in response to his own inventions, it is hardly worth replying. I will note that I fully support “Zapitistas who don’t want dams” and others who reject the demands of capitalist progress. As I made clear, “progress” under capitalism is shaped by inequalities of power and wealth. I obviously do not worship it, I just don’t reject all progress as inherently bad. It’s not that hard to understand. And I think it ironic that someone who wants the whole world to be “primitivist” has the cheek to call me an “imperialist” and “authoritarian,” particularly given that I said “As for the level of technology and industry they [in the ‘Global South’] would like, well, I think true anarchists should let them decide that themselves rather than seeking to impose primitivist fantasies onto them” (i.e. the same position I hold for the “Global North”).

I do find it funny WF1 mentioning I want to “organise strikes against those who refuse the ‘progress of the west.’” I assume that this is in response to my suggestions on *his* question of how “those in the Global North [can] communicate let alone convince a community in the Global South” not to “harness nuclear energy.” Which is a total distortion of my argument as well as being deeply ironic. There I was explaining how we could convince people *not* to follow our mistakes and WF1 turns it on its head!

His comrade gets annoyed by this as well, complaining that direct action would be used against a “group of workers [that] doesn’t want to play” in order to “force people to do what the

The letters by both members of the “Wildfire Collective” (WC) just reinforces the poverty of primitivism. Rather than address the issues I raised, they prefer personal attacks and distortion while having the cheek to accuse me of “vitriol, lies and half-truths”! Ignoring the insults, inventions, evasions and self-contradictions, their letters actually have little to say. Most of it is simply (and obviously) gross distortions of what I had argued.

“Wildfire 1” (WF1) complains that by “assert[ing] these two [of 5!] positions to us, in invented commas (as if lifted from the text)” I am being “dishonest and misrepresentative.” Yet the context of my letter makes it clear I was not quoting from the text and any reader of the original article will know that I was not.

Looking at the assertion that “organisation equals government” I cannot see what he is complaining about. The second bulletin obviously assumes this. This is more than confirmed by his suggestion that I have “all my hopes resting in becoming one of your illusionary ‘recallable’ politicians of the future.” And here is the person who takes offence to my “assertion” that he equates organisation with government! How ironic. Then there is his comrade’s letter, which calls “recallable delegates ... another form of governance,” even dismissing collective decision making as the individual being “crushed under the weight of ‘workers’ democracy.” Whether in the workplace or in a “small-scale” community, organisation means requires decisions to be reached and these will rarely make everyone happy. If every decision requires 100% agreement then the opinion of the 99% other members are “crushed” by the “lone voice.” It suggests a somewhat autocratic approach to cooperation, namely the expectation that everyone must do exactly what you want otherwise you are oppressed. Thus my “assertion”, rather than being “dishonest”, was correct.

WF1 says I propose “an ‘imperialist’ proletarian revolution on the majority world.” Really, WF1, do you think the readers

assume WF means the 8 million people of London. So, for WF, is the enemy the mass of the population? Apparently so. And I wonder how “those in the ‘countryside’” would appreciate a mass influx of millions of starving city folk, driven from the city by who knows what? But why let little issues like mass starvation and what people want and desire get in the way of the primitivist utopia?

What of WF’s argument that it is impossible to organise a city the size of London in a libertarian fashion? He wonders where all the delegates would meet. But why assume that **all** the delegates would have to meet or discuss **all** the many issues of the population. Many issues would be in the hands of those most affected and not require wider discussion. Most communication of needs would be direct. A community would contact workplace A for supplies, which would contact workplace B to arrange inputs, and so forth. For co-ordination of wider activity, there would be delegates of federations so cutting down on the number having to meet substantially. And as for FC’s pondering of how “those in the Global North [can] communicate let alone convince a community in the Global South” not to “harness nuclear energy,” have they not heard of e-mail, telephones, letters, petitions, sending delegates by plane? Or forms of direct action as the boycott, the strike? Or even protest marches? Or raising a protest motion at the appropriate federation congress?

So how would our “community’s voice [be] heard”? In the same way as the rest, by an elected, mandated and recallable delegate. Impossible? It worked during the French and Spanish revolutions and in the recent revolt in Argentina and would, I suggest, work far better than any primitivist alternative. Such a system will involve reaching agreements with others and so compromise, but freedom is not some immature desire to always get your way. That is the atomised, narrow and self-defeating individualism promoted by capitalism, not the social freedom desired by libertarians.

Popular self-management would apply in industry too. WF states that “workers control” means “placing technologies and skills in the hands of the few.” Actually, it means the opposite, i.e. workers’ controlling the technologies and skills they use rather than letting bosses (the few) do so. As for it being “enforced divided labour” and “workers self-exploitation” WF is really abusing the meaning of words. Yes, things will need to be produced and different tasks will involve different work but if this is “enforced divided labour” then so is *all* productive activity, including that in WF’s “small-scale” groups. Or perhaps the work required to get food is not “enforced” as the alternative is starvation? If so, then say hello to the usual capitalist defence of wage slavery!

Non-primitivist anarchists know that production “will continue to need raw resources to be built.” Yes, this will cause ecological destruction. But so will the ecological destruction caused by the breakdown of civilisation WF desires: nuclear meltdowns, toxic waste and oil slicks caused by abandoned industry, all the other legacies of industrial society, which (like the ruling class) will not just disappear. We will need to handle such problems while transforming society. And this is where the “industrial progression” WF dismisses out of hand comes into play. They cannot see that technology can be used by those who work to make it easier and reduce/eliminate the most unpleasant aspects of it. People can see the impact of their activity and would change things to minimise it. Yes, solar panels will use resources but they are less ecologically destructive than coal fires in every home. Which is, of course, “progress”. Would WF, as a true believer in anti-progress, oppose developments which save resources and reduce pollution?

Which exposes another problem with primitivism. It is the mirror image capitalist worship of progress (for one it’s good, the other evil). They are two-sides of the same, anti-human, coin. Anarchists see progress in a more complex light. It is surely a truism that “progress” under a hierarchical society

will be shaped by the equalities of power in it. This means that progress is not as neutral as either capitalists or technophobes like to suggest. Rather than the quasi-religious opposition to “progress” we should be using our minds, evaluating the costs and benefits of specific concrete forms of technology and production, seeking ways of improving and changing them and, perhaps, getting rid of some of them totally. Something anarchists have long argued people who are creating and living in a free society would do.

Ultimately, WF exposes the core problem with primitivism. For them, technology, “mass society” and “civilisation” *are* neutral. For the primitivist, all these things are inherently “bad” and so independent of the desires of the people affected by them and the system they are part of. However, once we realise that these things are *not* neutral we can see the way out. We can see that workers’ control is not “self-exploitation” but rather the first step in modifying technology and production to ecologise and humanise it. Similarly, the self-organisation and mass participation required by social struggle and revolution are the first steps in humanising society and civilising a “civilisation” distorted by the barbarism of capitalism and the state. And this new society would be take the best of existing cultures, technologies and skills to help produce a world of unique individuals who live in diverse communities and experience diverse cultures and ideas.

To end, WF complains that “the left claim these primitivists want Mad Max dystopias.” On the evidence of this article, I can only surmise that “the left” is right on this one.

Iain McKay

Reply to the Wildfire Reply

Dear *Freedom*