Civilisation, Primitivism and Anarchism

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Foreword

The central tenet of primitivism, anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilisationism is the abolition of technology. For most people, arguing against this is completely unnecessary, since it is immediately obvious that it is a terrible idea. Even given the most cursory glance it is clear that abolishing technology would have devastating consequences for humankind and the planet.[1]

For starters, the 50%[2] of the UK population who need glasses or contact lenses (which rises to 97% over the age of 65[3]) would soon be left severely impaired. Tens of millions of people dependent on drug treatments for illnesses would quickly die. Radioactive nuclear waste needs to be monitored and controlled with high-tech equipment for tens of thousands of years. Without it, even if buried deep underground, climate changes and tectonic plate movements will eventually cause it to leak out and wreak ecological devastation on the planet. This aside from the all the other obviously unattractive prospects of this idea — no more books, recorded music, medical equipment, central heating, sewage systems… — means that almost everyone would reject this idea immediately. However, within and around anarchist circles these ideas do have some support, so this article will examine them in more detail.

Introduction

Over the last decade a generalised critique of civilisation has been made by a number of authors, mostly based in the USA. Some of these have chosen to identify as anarchists although the more general self-identification is primitivist. Their overall argument is that 'civilisation' (i.e. mass, technological society) itself is the problem that results in our failure to live rewarding lives. The struggle for change is thus a struggle against civilisation and for an earth where technology has been eliminated. This is an interesting argument that has some merits as an intellectual exercise. But the problem is that some of its adherents have used primitivism as a base from which to attack all other proposals for changing society. Facing this challenge anarchists need to first look to see if primitivism offers any sort of realistic alternative to the world as it is.

An alternative?

Our starting point is that the expression 'life is hard' can always receive the reply that 'it is better than the alternative'. This provides a good general test of all critiques of the world 'as it is', including anarchism — which is to ask if a better alternative is possible.

Even if we can't point to the 'better alternative', criticisms of the world 'as it is' can have a certain intellectual value. But after the disaster of the 20th century when so-called alternatives like Leninism created long lasting dictatorships that killed millions, the question 'is your alternative any better then what exists?' has to be put to anyone advocating change.

The primitivist critique of anarchism is based around the claim to have discovered a contradiction between liberty and mass society. In other words they see it as impossible for any society

[1] This foreword was written by libcom. What follows is an article by Andrew Flood which we have edited www.libcom.org

[2] news.zdnet.co.uk

[3] www.tiresias.org

that involves groups much larger than a village to be a free society. If this was true it would make the anarchist proposal of a world of 'free federations of towns, cities and countryside' impossible. Such federations and population centres are obviously a form of mass society/civilisation.

However the anarchist movement has been answering this very so-called contradiction since its origins. Back in the 19th century liberal defenders of the state pointed to such a contradiction in order to justify the need for one set of men to rule over another. Anarchist-communist Mikhail Bakunin answered this in 1871 in his essay on 'The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State"[4].

> It is said that the harmony and universal solidarity of individuals with society can never be attained in practice because their interests, being antagonistic, can never be reconciled. To this objection I reply that if these interests have never as yet come to mutual accord, it was because the State has sacrificed the interests of the majority for the benefit of a privileged minority. That is why this famous incompatibility, this conflict of personal interests with those of society, is nothing but a fraud, a political lie, born of the theological lie which invented the doctrine of original sin in order to dishonour man and destroy his self-respect.
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> … We are convinced that all the wealth of man's intellectual, moral, and material development, as well as his apparent independence, is the product of his life in society. Outside society, not only would he not be a free man, he would not even become genuinely human, a being conscious of himself, the only being who thinks and speaks. Only the combination of intelligence and collective labour was able to force man out of that savage and brutish state which constituted his original nature, or rather the starting point for his further development. We are profoundly convinced that the entire life of men — their interests, tendencies, needs, illusions, even stupidities, as well as every bit of violence, injustice, and seemingly voluntary activity — merely represent the result of inevitable societal forces. People cannot reject the idea of mutual independence, nor can they deny the reciprocal influence and uniformity exhibiting the manifestations of external nature.

What level of technology?

Most primitivists evade the question of what level of technology they wish to return to by hiding behind the claim that they are not arguing for a return to anything, on the contrary they want to go forward. With that in mind a reasonable summary of their position is that certain technologies are acceptable up to the level of small village society sustained by hunting and gathering. The problems for primitivists start with the development of agriculture and mass society.

Of course civilisation (also rarely defined by primitivists) is a rather general term, as is technology. Few of these primitivists have taken this argument to its logical conclusion. One who has is John Zerzan who identifies the root of the problem in the evolution of language and abstract thought. This is a logical end point for the primitivist rejection of mass society.

For the purposes of this article I'm taking as a starting point that the form of future society that primitivists argue for would be broadly similar in technological terms to that which existed around 12,000 years ago on earth, at the dawn of the agricultural revolution. By this I do not

[4] libcom.org

claim that they want to 'go back', something that is in any case impossible. But rather that if you seek to go forward by getting rid of all the technology of the agricultural revolution and beyond what results will look quite like pre-agricultural society of 10,000 BC. As this is the only example we have of such a society in operation it seems reasonable to use it to evaluate the primitivist claims.

A question of numbers

Hunter-gatherers live off the food they can hunt or gather, hence the name. Animals can be hunted or trapped while fruits, nuts, greens and roots are gathered. Before about 12,000 years ago every human on the planet lived as a hunter gather. Today only a tiny number of people do, in isolated and marginal regions of the planet including deserts, artic tundra and jungle. Some of these groups like the Acre have only had contact with the rest of the planet in recent decades[5], others like the Inuit[6] have had contact for long periods of time and so have adopted technologies beyond those developed locally. These later groups are very much part of the global civilisation and have contributed to the development of new technologies in this civilisation.

In marginal ecosystems hunter-gathering often represents the only feasible way of producing food. The desert is too dry for sustained agriculture and the arctic too cold. The only other possibility is pastoralism, the reliance on semi-domesticated animals as a food source. For instance in the Scandinavian arctic the Sami[7] control the movement of huge reindeer herds to provide a regular food source.

Hunter gathers survive on the food they hunt and gather. This requires very low population densities as population growth is limited by the need to avoid over hunting. Too much gathering of food plants can also serve to reduce the number of plants that are available in the future. This is the core problem with the primitivist idea that the whole planet could live as hunter gathers, there is not nearly enough food produced in natural ecosystems for even a fraction of the current population of the world to do so.

It should be obvious that the amount of calories available to humans as food in an acre of oak forest will be a lot lower then the amount of calories available to humans in an acre of corn. Agriculture provides far, far more useful calories per acre then hunter gathering in the same acre would. That is because we have spent 12,000 years selecting plants and improving agricultural techniques so that per acre we cram in lots of productive plants that put their energy into producing plant parts that are food for us rather then plant parts that are not food for us. Compare any cultivated grain with its wild relative and you will see an illustration of this, the cultivated form will have much bigger grains and a much larger proportion of grain to stalk and foliage. We have chosen plants that produce a high ratio of edible biomass.

In other words a pine tree may be as good or better then a lettuce at capturing the solar energy that falls on it. But with the lettuce a huge percentage of the captured energy goes into food (around 75%). With pine tree none of the energy produces food we can eat. Compare the amount of food to be found in a nearby woodland with the amount you can grow in a couple of square meters of garden cultivated in even an organic low energy fashion and you'll see why

[5] www.guardian.co.uk
[6] www.heritage.nf.ca
[7] www.yukoncollege.yk.ca

agriculture is a must have for the population of the planet. An acre of organically grown potato can yield 15,000 lbs of food[8]. A a square that is 70 yards wide and 70 yards long measures just over an acre.

The estimated population of human on the earth before the advent of agriculture (10,000 BC) varies with some estimates as low as 250,000[9]. Other estimates for the pre-agricultural hunter gather population are more generous, in the range of 6 to 10 million[10]. The earth's current population is over 6,000 million.

This 6,000 million are almost all supported by agriculture. They could not be supported by hunter gathering, indeed it is suggested that even the 10 million hunter gathers who may have existed before agriculture may have been a non sustainable number. Evidence for this can be seen in the Pleistocene overkill[11], a period from 12,000 to 10,000 BC in which 200 genera of large mammals went extinct. In the Americas in this period over 80% of the population of large mammals became extinct[12]. That this was due to over hunting is one controversial hypothesis. If correct than the advent of agriculture (and civilisation) may even have been due to the absence of large game which forced hunter gathers to 'settle down' and find other ways of obtaining food.

Certainly in recorded history the same over hunting has been observed with the arrival of man on isolated Polynesian islands. Over hunting caused the extinction of the Dodo in Mauretania and the Moa in New Zealand not to mention many less famous species.

Living in the bog in winter

Another way of looking at the fact that primitivism cannot support all of the people of the planet is more anecdotal and uses Ireland(1) as an example. Left to itself the Irish countryside would consist mostly of mature oak forest with some hazel scrub and bogs. Go into an oak forest and see how much food you can gather — if you know your stuff there is some. Acorns, fruit on brambles in clearings, some wild garlic, strawberries, edible fungi, wild honey, and the meat from animals like deer, squirrel, wild goat and pigeon that can be hunted. But this is much, much, much fewer calories then the same area cultivated as wheat or potatoes would yield. There is simply not enough land in Ireland to support 5 million, the current population of the island, as hunter gatherers.

Typically hunter gatherers live at a population density of 1 per 10 square km. (Irelands present population density is around 500 per 10 square km or 500 times this(2)). By extending this standard calculation from elsewhere on the planet the number that could be supported in Ireland would be less then 70,000. Probably a lot less as only 20% of Ireland is arable land. Blanket bog or Burren karst provide little in the way of food useful for humans. In winter there would be very little food to be gathered (perhaps small caches of nuts hidden by squirrels and some wild honey) and that

[8] www.gardensofeden.org

[9] biology.queensu.ca

[10] qrc.depaul.edu

[11] geography.berkeley.edu

[12] qrc.depaul.edu

(1) libcom — where the author lives, though figures for the UK are comparable, though even less favourable for would-be hunter-gatherers

(2) libcom — for the UK this is nearly 2,500 times this, 2,460 per 10 square km

even 70,000 people living off hunting would eradicate the large mammals (deer, wild goat) very quickly. The coastal areas and larger rivers and lakes would be the main source of hunting and some gathering in the form of shellfish and edible seaweed.

But being generous and multiplying the typical hunter gatherers population density by 10, and assuming that somehow Ireland could sustain 70,000 hunter gatherers we discover we need to 'reduce' the population by some 4,930,000. Or 98.6% [libcom note — for the UK these figures are even worse — a generous maximum of 240,000 people out of 60m, thus requiring a 99.6% reduction in population]. The actual archaeological estimates for the population of Ireland before the arrival of agriculture is around 7,000 people.

The idea that a certain amount of land can support a certain amount of people according to how it is (or in this case is not) cultivated is referred to as its 'carrying capacity'. This can be estimated for the earth as a whole. One modern calculation for hunter gatherers actually give you 100 million as the maximum figure but just how much of a maximum this is becomes clear when you realise that using similar methods gives 30 billion as the maximum farming figure[13]. That would be five times the world's current population!

But let's take this figure of 100 million as the maximum rather then the historical maximum of 10 million. This is generous estimate, well above that of those primitivists who have dared to address this issue. For instance Miss Ann Thropy writing in the US Earth First! magazine estimated, "Ecotopia would be a planet with about 50 million people who are hunting and gathering for subsistence."[14]

The earth population today is around 6,000 million. A return to a 'primitive' earth therefore requires that some 5900 million people disappear. Something has to happen to 98% of the world's population in order for the 100 million survivors to have even the slightest hope of a sustainable primitive utopia.

Dirty tricks?

At this point some primitivist writers like John Moore cry foul, dismissing the suggestion "that the population levels envisaged by anarcho-primitivists would have to be achieved by mass die-offs or nazi-style death camps. These are just smear tactics. The commitment of anarcho-primitivists to the abolition of all power relations, including the State with all its administrative and military apparatus, and any kind of party or organisation, means that such orchestrated slaughter remains an impossibility as well as just plain horrendous."[15]

The problem for John is that these 'smear tactics' are based not only on the logical requirements of a primitivist world but are also explicitly acknowledged by other primitivists. Miss Ann Thropy's 50 million has already been quoted. Another primitivist FAQ claims "Drastic population reductions are going to happen whether we do it voluntarily or not. It would be better, for obvious reasons to do all this gradually and voluntarily, but if we don't the human population is going to be cut anyway."[16]

[13] Google cache page www.google.ie: (sorry but the page is not directly accessible)

[14] "Miss Ann Thropy," *Earth First!* Dec. 22, 1987, cited at www.processedworld.com

[15] www.eco-action.org

[16] www.libcom.org.uk
www.eco-action.org

The Coalition Against Civilisation write "We need to be realistic about what would happen were we to enter a post-civilised world. One basic write-off is that a lot of people would die upon civil collapse. While being a hard thing to argue to a moralistic person, we shouldn't pretend this wouldn't be the case."[17]

More recently Derrick Jensen in an interview from Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*[18] said civilisation "needs to be actively fought against, but I don't think that we can bring it down. What we can do is assist the natural world to bring it down… I want civilisation brought down and I want it brought down now." We have seen above what the consequences of 'bringing down' civilisation are.

In short there is no shortage of primitivists who recognise that the primitive world they desire would require "mass die-offs". I've not come across any who advocate "nazi-style death camps" but perhaps John just threw this in to muddy the water. Primitivists like John Moore can therefore refuse to confront this question of die off by upping the emotional ante and by accusing those who point the need for die-off out as carrying out 'smear tactics'. It's up to him to explain either how 6 billion can be fed or to admit that primitivism is no more then an intellectual mind game.

My expectation is that just about everyone when confronted with this requirement of mass death will conclude that 'primitivism' offers nothing to fight for. A very few, like the survivalists confronted by the threat of nuclear war in the 1980's, might conclude that all this is inevitable and start planning how their loved ones will survive when others die. But this latter group has moved far, far beyond any understanding of anarchism as I understand it. So the 'anarcho' prefix such primitivists try to claim has to be rejected.

Most primitivists run away from the requirement for mass death in one of two ways. The more cuddly ones decide that primitivism is not a program for a different way of running the world. Rather it exists as a critique of civilisation and not an alternative to it. This is fair enough and there is a value in re-examining the basic assumptions of civilisation. But in that case primitivism is no substitute for the anarchist struggle for liberation, which involves adapting technology to our needs rather then rejecting it. The problem is that primitivists like to attack the very methods of mass organisation that are necessary for overthrowing capitalism. Reasonable enough if you believe you have an alternative to anarchism but rather damaging if all you have is an interesting critique!

Other primitivists however take the Cassandra path, telling us they are merely prophets of an inevitable doom. They don't desire the death of 5,900 million they just point out it cannot be prevented. This is worth examining in some detail precisely because it is so disempowering. What after all is the use of fighting for a fair society today if tomorrow or the day after 98% if us are going to die and everything we have built crumble to dust?

Are we all doomed?

Primitivists are not the only ones to use the rhetoric of catastrophe to panic people into accepting their political proposals. Reformists such as George Monbiot, use similar 'we are all doomed' arguments to try and stampede people into support for reformism and world government. In the

[17] *The Practical Anarcho-Primitivist: actualizing the implications of a critique* — Coalition Against Civilisation — www.coalitionagainstcivilisation.org

[18] Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*, this interview online on infoshop: www.infoshop.org

last decade's acceptance that the world is somehow doomed has become part of mainstream culture, first as the Cold War and then as looming environmental disaster. George Bush and Tony Blair created a panic over "Weapons of Mass Destruction" to give cover to their invasion of Iraq. The need to examine and dismantle such panics is clear.

The most convincing form the 'end of civilisation' panic takes is the idea of a looming resource crisis that will make life as we know it impossible. And the best resource to focus on for those who wish to make this argument is oil. Everything we produce, including food, is dependant on massive energy inputs and 40% of the world's energy use is generated from oil.

The primitivist version of this argument goes something like this, 'everyone knows that in X number of year the oil will run out, this will mean civilisation will grind to a halt, and this will mean lots of people will die. So we might as well embrace the inevitable'. The oil running out argument is the primitivist equivalent of the orthodox Marxist 'final economic crisis that results in the overthrow of capitalism'. And, just like the orthodox Marxists, primitivists always argue this final crisis is always just around the corner.

When looked at in any detail this argument evaporates and it becomes clear that neither capitalism nor civilisation face a final crisis because of the oil running out. This is not because oil supplies are inexhaustible, indeed we may be reaching or have reached the peak of oil production today. But far from being the end of capitalism or civilisation this is an opportunity for profit and restructuring. Capital however reluctantly, is gearing up to make profits out of developing alternative energy sources on the one hand and on the other of accessing plentiful but more destructive ways to extract fossil fuel supplies. The second path of course makes global warming and other forms of pollution a lot worse but that's not likely to stop the global capitalist class.

It is not just primitivists who have become mesmerised by the oil crisis, but in summary, while oil will become more expensive over the decades the process to develop substitutes for it is already underway. Denmark for instance intends to produce 50% of its energy needs from wind farms by 2030 and Danish companies are already making vast amounts of money because they are the leading producers of wind turbines. The switch over from oil is likely to provide an opportunity to make profits for capitalism rather then representing some form of final crisis.

There may well be an energy crisis as oil starts to rise in price and alternative technologies are not yet capable of filling the 40% of energy generation filled by oil. This will cause oil and therefore energy prices to soar but this will be a crisis for the poor of the world and not for the wealthy some of whom will even profit from it. A severe energy crisis could trigger a global economic downturn but again it is the world's workers that suffer the most in such times. There is a good argument that the world's elite are already preparing for such a situation, many of the recent US wars make sense in terms of securing future oil supplies for US corporations.

Capitalism is quite capable of surviving very destructive crisis. World War II saw many of the major cities of Europe destroyed and most of the industry of central Europe flattened. (By bombers, by war, by retreating Germans and then torn up and shipped east by advancing Russians). Millions of European workers died as a result both in the war years and in the years that followed. But capitalism not only survived, it flourished as starvation allowed wages to be driven down and profits soared.

What if?

However it is worth doing a little mental exercise on this idea of the oil running out. If indeed there was no alternative what might happen? Would a primitivist utopia emerge even at the bitter price of 5,900 million people dying?

No. The primitivists seem to forget that we live in a class society. The population of the earth is divided into a few people with vast resources and power and the rest of us. It is not a case of equal access to resources, rather of quite incredible unequal access. Those who fell victim to the mass die off would not include Rubert Murdoch, Bill Gates or George Bush because these people have the money and power to monopolise remaining supplies for themselves.

Instead the first to die in huge number would be the population of the poorer mega cities on the planet. Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt have a population of around 20 million between them. Egypt is dependent both on food imports and on the very intensive agriculture of the Nile valley and the oasis. Except for the tiny wealthy elite those 20 million urban dwellers would have nowhere to go and there is no more land to be worked. Current high yields are in part dependent on high inputs of cheap energy.

The mass deaths of millions of people is not something that destroys capitalism. Indeed at periods of history it has been seen as quite natural and even desirable for the modernisation of capital. The potato famine of the 1840's that reduced the population of Ireland by 30% was seen as desirable by many advocates of free trade[19]. So was the 1943/4 famine in British ruled Bengal in which four million died[20]. For the capitalist class such mass deaths, particularly in colonies, afford opportunities to restructure the economy in ways that would otherwise be resisted.

The real result of an 'end of energy' crisis would see our rulers stock piling what energy sources remained and using them to power the helicopter gunships that would be used to control those of us fortunate enough to be selected to toil for them in the biofuel fields. The unlucky majority would just be kept where they are and allowed to die off. More of the 'Matrix' than utopia in other words.

The other point to be made here is that destruction can serve to regenerate capitalism. Like it or not large scale destruction allows some capitalist to make a lot of money. Think of the Iraq war. The destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure may be a disaster for the people of Iraq buts it's a profit making bonanza for Halliburton and co.[21]. Not coincidentally the Iraq war is helping the USA, where the largest corporations are based, gain control of the parts of the planet where much future and current oil production takes place.

We can extend our intellectual exercise still further. Let us pretend that some anarchists are magically transported from the Earth to some Earth-like planet elsewhere. And we are dumped there without any technology at all. The few primitivists amongst us might head off to run with the deer but a fair percentage would sit down and set about trying to create an anarchist civilisation. Many of the skills we could bring might not be that useful (programming without computers is of little use) but between us we'd have a good basic knowledge of agriculture, engineering, hydraulics and physics. Next time the primitivists wandered through the area we settled they'd find a landscape of farms and dams.

[19] struggle.ws

[20] www.abc.net.au

[21] For a reasoned critique of collapism from a Green anarchist perspective see pub47.ezboard.com

We'd at least have wheeled carts and possibly draft animals if any of the large game were suitable for domestication. We'd send out parties looking for obvious sources of coal and iron and if we found these we'd mine and transport them. If not we'd be felling a lot of lumber to turn into charcoal to extract whatever iron or copper we could from what could be found. The furnace and the smelter would also be found on that landscape. We'd have some medical knowledge, most importantly an understanding of germs and medical hygiene so we'd have both basic water purification and sewage removal systems.

We'd understand the importance of knowledge so we'd have an education system for our children and at least the beginnings of a long-term store of knowledge (books). We could probably find the ingredients for gunpowder, which are quite common, which would give us the blasting technology need for large-scale mining and construction. If there was any marble nearby we could make concrete, which is a much better building material then wood or mud.

Technology did not come from the gods. It was not imposed on man by a mysterious outside force. Rather it is something we developed and continue to develop. Even if you could turn the clock back it would just start ticking again. John Zerzan seems to be the only primitivist capable of acknowledging this and he retreats to the position of seeing language and abstract thought as the problem. He is both right and ludicrous at the same time. His vision of utopia requires not only the death of the mass of the world's population but would require the genetically engineered lobotomy of those who survive and their offspring! Not of course something he advocates but a logical end point of his argument.

Why argue against it?

So why spend so much space demolishing such a fragile ideology as primitivism. One reason is the embarrassing connection with anarchism some primitivists seek to claim. More importantly primitivism both by implication and often in its calls wants its followers to reject rationalism for mysticism and oneness with nature. They are not the first irrational ecological movement to do so, a good third of the German Nazi party came from forest-worshipping blood and soil movements that sprung up in Germany in the aftermath of World War I.

This is not an empty danger. Within primitivism a self-proclaimed irrational wing has developed that if not yet advocating "nazi-style death camps" has openly celebrated the deaths and murder of large numbers of people as a first step.

In December 1997 the US publication *Earth First* wrote that "the AIDS epidemic, rather than being a scourge, is a welcome development in the inevitable reduction of human population."[22] Around the same period in Britain Steve Booth, one of the editors of a magazine called 'Green Anarchist ', wrote that

> "The Oklahoma bombers had the right idea. The pity was that they did not blast any more government offices. Even so, they did all they could and now there are at least 200 government automatons that are no longer capable of oppression. 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. They were not secretive enough. They had the technology to produce the gas but the method of delivery was ineffective.

[22] *Earth First!*, Dec. 22, 1987, cited at www.processedworld.com

> One day the groups will be totally secretive and their methods of fumigation will be completely effective."[23]

This is where you end up when you celebrate spirituality over rationality. When the hope of 'running with deer' overcomes the need to deal with the problem of making a revolution on a planet of 6 billion people. The ideas above have only reactionary conclusions. Their logic is elitist and hierarchical, little more that a semi-secular version of gods chosen people laying waste to the unbelievers. It certainly has nothing in common with anarchism. We need more not less technology.

Which brings us back to the start. Civilisation comes with many, many problems but it is better than the alternative. The challenge for anarchists is in transforming civilisation to a form that is without hierarchy, or imbalances of power or wealth. This is not a new challenge, it has always been the challenge of anarchism as shown by the lengthy Bakunin quotation at the start of this essay.

To do this we need modern technology to clean our water, pump away and process our waste and inoculate or cure people of the diseases of high population density. With only 10 million people on the earth you can shit in the woods providing you keep moving on. With 6 billion those who shit in the woods are shitting in the water they and those around them will have to drink. According to the UN "each year, more than 2.2 million people die from water and sanitation related diseases, many of them children". Close to one billion urban dwellers have no access to sustainable sanitation. Data for "43 African cities … shows that 83 percent of the population do not have toilets connected to sewers"[24].

The challenge then is not simply the construction of a civilisation that keeps everyone's standards of living at the level they are now. The challenge is raising just about everyone's standard of living but doing so in a manner that is reasonably sustainable. Only the further development of technology coupled to a revolution that eliminates inequality across the planet can deliver this.

It is unfortunate that some anarchists who live in the most developed, most wealthy and most technological nations of the world prefer to play with primitivism than getting down to thinking about how we can really change the world. The global transformation required will make all previous revolutions fade into insignificance.

The major problem is not simply that capitalism has been happy to leave a huge proportion of the world's population in poverty. The problem is also that development has been aimed at creating consumers for future products rather then providing what people need.

As long as capitalism exists it will continue to wreak environmental havoc as it chases profits. It will only effectively respond to the energy crisis once that becomes profitable and because there will be a lag of many years before oil can be replaced this might mean worsening poverty and death for many of the poorer people in the world. But we cannot fix these problems by dreaming of some lost golden age when the world's population was low enough to support hunter gathering. We can only sort it out by building the sort of mass movements that can not only overthrow capitalism but also introduce a libertarian society. And on the way we need to find ways to halt and even reverse some of the worst of the environmental threats capitalism is generating.

[23] *Green Anarchist*, number 51, page 11, a defence of these remarks was published in Number 52. The author Steve Booth was a *GA* editor (and the treasurer) at the time.

[24] www.unhabitat.org

Primitivism is a pipe dream — it offers no way forwards in the struggle for a free society. Often its adherents end up undermining that struggle by attacking the very things, like mass organisation, that are a requirement to win it. Those primitivists who are serious about changing the world need to re-examine what they are fighting for.

Libcom Summary

1. Primitivism is such a ridiculous idea it should not even need arguing against, although unfortunately within anarchist circle it does.
2. Abolishing technology would have catastrophic consequences for the planet in terms of nuclear waste leakage, and on ill or disabled people, not to mention general quality of life.
3. Hunter-gathering could only feed an absolute maximum of 100m people, thereby necessitating a reduction of population of 5,900m people. Primitivists cannot explain how this will come about.
4. Even if there were ecological disaster or mass human die-off it would not destroy capitalism or class society, it would simply be used by capital as an opportunity to restructure, and ensure the class divide stays intact.
5. There is nothing inherently wrong with technology, it just depends on how it is applied — in a free society they can be used to increase freedom (from onerous work, or physical disability etc.).
6. To protect the planet we do not to get rid of technology, only of the wasteful and destructive system of capitalism which places profit above all else. To do that we need mass working class organisations which can protect our conditions, and our planet, and eventually run society on the basis of co-operation, not profit.

More information

Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism — An Unbridgeable Chasm, by Murray Bookchin. See especially chapters 6 and 7.

Comment Replies

John Zerzan

Flood probably knows that nowhere have I rejected "abstract thought" but it better serves his weak assault on "primitivism" to say otherwise. Some of our ancestors were cooking with fire 2 million years ago, travelling on the open seas 800,000 years ago. And yet the evidence for symbolic culture hardly goes back 40,000 years. Thus, it would seem, there was intelligence that preceded what we think of as symbolic. Possibly a more direct kind in keeping with a more direct connection with the natural world.

Well, this is a long topic that I won't try to rehash here. One that doesn't quite fit Flood's sound byte characterization…

It could also be noted that population is hardly a given. It seems to be more an effect than a cause, for instance : an effect of domestication ab origino, if we are talking about civilization. And so it seems to me likely that the numbers might come down fairly quickly were we to move away from domestication. I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight, Flood to the contrary. JZ

Aragorn!

I also do not agree with Flood.

He seems to focus his critique on what he calls the question of whether primitivism provides "any sort of realistic alternative" which always seems like a bizarre metric for an anarchist to use as measurement.

What exactly would an anarchist 'realistic alternative' to social revolution look like?

I don't believe anyone knows.

But if there were a distinction between a primitivist approach to social revolution and a syndicalist (or whatever in the fuck Flood is) one, how would you sketch it out?

Anon

> The primitivist critique of anarchism is based around the claim to have discovered a contradiction between liberty and mass society.

Primitivism isn't, in itself, a critique of anarchism at all. It is a supplement to anarchism, just as syndicalism or communism would be. The primitivist critique (and that of anti-civilization generally) of certain schools of thought in anarchism is not necessarily that "liberty" and "mass society" are irreconcilable, except in broadening "liberty" to mean the right for all life to experience the integrity and continuity of their ecosystem.

The argument is that civilization (and for some, technology, agriculture, language, and other products of human society) is not compatible with ecological sustainability–and that the persistence of civilization, whether feudal, capitalist, socialist or anarchist, would lead to the eventual destruction of the life-sustaining qualities of this planet. While I'd dispute some of the arguments against technology (which, if taken so broadly, is an argument against sentience), agriculture (which can be sustainable, depending upon certain methods), language and abstract thought, the argument that civilization is ecologically destructive has a historical basis.

One can follow that argument to the conclusion that repression is a natural enforcement mechanism of any system that destroys the ecosystem–eco is derived from the Greek word oikos, meaning house or habitation. In the expansion of civilization, sustainable, egalitarian societies were either destroyed or civilized by force. This process was followed by deforestation, soil erosion, soil depletion, salination, and eventually desertification. Repression is necessary to convince any living being to destroy its home. This is true regardless of social organization, and an anarchist society would need to be severely auto-repressive in order to maintain civilization.

The author, of course, conflates anti-civilization with anti-agriculture, anti-technology and anti-thought, and therefore with hunting and gathering, which isn't necessary. It's widely agreed that the planet can ecologically sustain about one billion humans in agricultural societies. This would require a significant change to our social and economic relationships. It would also require the elimination of certain technologies: the processes necessary to fuel or build most modern technological wonders are environmentally destructive, regardless of who "controls the means of production" or their consciousness in doing so. Mining, mass monocultural farming, large-scale electricity leave too large a footprint.

The author is sure to recognize that human populations are far too high for ecological integrity, but is quick to retreat to accusations of genocidal intent, apparently arguing that ecocide is necessary as a prevention of genocide. What the author must fail to recognize is that humans die every day (making a natural progression towards a sustainable human population possible), and that an eventual product of ecocide will be mass human deaths. Arguing that requiring a dramatic reduction in human populations is unrealistic is dishonest, because Earth is finite, and the reduction will happen eventually, be it from a gradual return to balance that comes with a conscious rejection of civilization, or from a cataclysmic collapse of the ecosystem.

The article makes so many assumptions that can't be true. A "tiny wealthy elite" could not possibly continue to control vast natural resources in the event of collapse–when one elite can no longer hold a carrot in front of thousands of poor, those poor will revolt. And much of the article is predicated on the domination of the environment which led to the ecological crisis we are facing.

The author argues that, given the chance to start over on "some Earth like planet", "the few primitivists amongst us might head off to run with the deer," but the "next time the primitivists wandered through the area we settled they'd find a landscape of farms and dams" (nevermind that farms require deforestation and dams destroy water life), "domestication" (enslavement) of large mammals, mining of coal and iron (destroying mountain ecosystems), "felling a lot of lumber to turn into charcoal to extract whatever iron or copper we could from what could be found" (deliberate deforestation and conscious destruction of finite resources), purification of water (which somehow would have been contaminated, the author doesn't explain how…), "sewage removal systems" (to where? Now "water purification" makes more sense…), "large-scale mining and construction" (large-scale habitat destruction), concrete (!).

We need to really come to terms with the word "unsustainable." It is not an abstract concept, the world is finite, and that will never change. The death of salmon and large mammals, the disappearance of bird populations and most of the planet's vegetation, are not only aesthetic losses to be mourned as unfortunate (though they are obviously that, too), but they are signs of a planetary illness. If we don't deal with sustainability, we are effectively driving towards a brick wall, either accelerating or maintaining pace. Even if we simply slow down, the brick wall will remain. The world is finite.

The world is finite.

No human social arrangements can change this, and we will continue on our charge towards the brick wall until we re-evaluate our inter-species social relations.

Vegan hobo

So what is your union going to do for the few remaining forests or coal reserves (industrial production does have to continue for you to have the working class to organize)? How are you helping the 200 billions animals slaughtered every year by organizing slaughter house workers to get better wages (must we really make murder a more comfortable job?) or helping UPS workers win the strike and get back to work while UPS support HLS (giant animal research lab). Your working class struggle is selfish and short sighted. Get a clue.

Working class humans are not the only beings oppressed on this planet. Primitivism is a war of total liberation, human, animal, and earth. Primitive anarchy existed for nearly 3 million years. Many primitivists have stated that the return to a naturally sustainable population level will be a process over many generations. No mass die-offs just lower birth rates. Primitivists don't need to explain how 6 billion can be fed because we don't intend to live in a world with that many people… POPULATION LEVELS IF GIVEN TIME CAN DROP WITHOUT DEATH CAMPS! Its called not having so many babies… can you handle that?…

Now lets start working on a way to convince people to stop having all those kids and find ways to distribute birth control info so that people can voluntarily lower the population… or do you think that people could never do that of their own free will? Is it impossible that humans will realize that our population is out of control and think that maybe they should do something about it.

You accuse primitivists of being heartless and possibly supporting the idea of mass die off while you defend a system of production that has created an epidemic of cancer, while you support industrial production that kills millions directly and indirectly (humans that is…for non-humans it would be in thew upper billions) A greater percentage of the population has starved under intensive agriculture than went hungry in H/G societies.

Agriculture dosen't prevent famine…it causes it. As population rises you have more mouths to feed so you have to grow more crops and then the population keeps expanding because there are non natural boundaries left soon you have to put a lot of work into feel all those people and their survival becomes dependent on a good harvest… so you put millions at risk of starving in a situation that would hardly phase a H/G band.

A nomadic H/G band was far less susceptible to famine because they didn't rely on having a good harvest but rather the naturally occurring plants in the area. The climate change would have to be quite extreme to kill off all native foliage…and even then it is a natural disaster…

you cant blame its victims. With out being settled the nomadic bands were much more free to move about to avoid over gathering or hunting (which they didn't do alot of until much later in the paleolithic…early man was primarily a gatherer since you can get more calories per calorie expended from gathering plants and scavenging than from hunting)

But primitivism isn't a dogmatic ideology that say we must all live just like H/Gs only that we must (for the survival of the planet and all life on it) we must recognize that we are just one animal among many and then begin to step down from our role as denominators of all that is wild and free and stop seeking to control nature for our own ends. Agriculture circumvents a vital natural population check. Unsanitary conditions in cities isn't caused by lack of technology but by the fact that urban environments exist at all. As our population increases we have to find more ways to feed the masses, protect them from disease that are created(or made worse) by industrial production and civilization (http://www.primitivism.com/health-civilization.htm). We have become dependent on technology for our very survival…sure going cold turkey would collectively be quite painful…but what about slowly weening ourselves off of it. Move towards local organic gardens to feed the people while other obliterate their prisons and factories (or are they one and the same) to make way for wilderness to take back over. Over the period of several generations we could be on our way to global healing.

"We'd at least have wheeled carts and possibly draft animals if any of the large game were suitable for domestication." yeah cause its ok to dominate a sentient being just as long as its not human right?… damn speciesists.

While primitivists seeks to overthrow all forms of domination whether man on man, man on animal, or man on the planet. While your moral sphere only includes those genetically closest to you… where's the rationality in that? Other beings that die daily for the survival of our precious civilization have a capacity for pain and emotional life (some even have self consciousness). I don't know of any anarcho-primitivist that has advocated imposing their will upon others while you certainly have shown you have no problem with mass killing or making slaves of animals and exploiting the land for you own good (taking away vital habitat and feeding ground)

A reply to the replies

Is primitivism realistic? An anarchist reply to John Zerzan and others

Last year I published the article 'Civilisation, Primitivism and Anarchism' ['Primitivism, anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilisationism: criticism'] to sketch out what I saw as the glaring contradictions in primitivism and where it clashed with anarchism. Primitivism, I argued, was an absurdity that could never happen without the 'removal' of the vast majority of the world's population. And far from being related to anarchism it was in contradiction with the basic tenet of anarchism; the possibility of having a free mass society without a state.

The article has circulated on and off-line over the year and sparked numerous discussions. A number of primitivists, including John Zerzan[1], have replied directly to it, and others have published what appear to be indirect replies. Here I want to answer the direct replies and, in doing so, expand the critique of primitivism.

The original essay was also using 'primitivism' as a stalking horse to address what I see as one of the major problems in anarchism as it appears in the 'English speaking' world. That is a large-scale failure to take itself seriously. So-called 'anarcho'-primitivism is the most obvious example. But sections of the actual anarchist movement have also constructed a set of ideological positions that almost seem designed to make successful mass work impossible. Large sections of the anarchist movement seem to have forgotten that the goal of anarchism is to change the world, not simply to provide a critique of the left or be a minor thorn in the side of the state.

Is primitivism realistic?

This reply continues in the same vein, on the surface it is about primitivism but you don't have to dig that deep to see that some of the criticisms can be applied in a more general sense. A good place to start in that context is with a poster calling himself Aragorn who posted on more than one of the sites that carried the original article. In a comment on AnarchistNews.org Aragorn states that Flood "seems to focus his critique on what he calls the question of whether primitivism provides 'any sort of realistic alternative' which always seems like a bizarre metric for an anarchist to use as measurement"[2]. This is the statement that inspired the title of this essay. Here we have someone who openly proclaims it to be "bizarre" to even ask if primitivism provides a realistic alternative to capitalism.

Far from being a refutation to the original essay this re-enforces the central point of it. That there is no way the advocates of primitivism could take the idea seriously if they thought its

[1] The first comment in reply to the posting of the article on Anarchist News appears to be from Zerzan (it's posted anonymously but refers to 'I' in disputing what Zerzan has said and is signed JZ). Mind you it could be another primitivist impersonating him — they do a fair bit of that. anarchistnews.org

[2] At anarchistnews.org — in fact 'Aragorn' may simply not understand what was said in the original as the realistic alternative referred to was in relation to current society and not social revolution i.e. "Facing this challenge anarchists need to first look to see if primitivism offers any sort of realistic alternative to the world as it is."

consequences through. A lot of primitivism theory strikes me as the work of those who like playing with ideas but really have no idea of how these ideas could be implemented. As with Aragorn who even finds the idea of implementation of his own ideas "bizarre". But this is also a problem in the anarchist movement. All too often plans are drawn up or slogans trotted out without asking if they are realistic. Can they actually achieve what they claim to be about? The only test that appears to be used is whether the plan is 'pure' enough. What sort of test is this for anything except perhaps for a religious sect?

The core issue

Generally responses to the essay from primitivists were often a lot more constructive then what I expected. I expected to get mostly abuse, and I did but a few did attempt to address the arguments. However there was no real attempt to address the core point of my original article. Which was that the 'population question' made a joke out of any claim by primitivism to be anything beyond a critique of the world. This is unsurprising — as far as I can tell there is no answer to the very obvious problem that emerges when you compare the number of people living on the planet (6 billion plus) and the optimistic maximum of 100 million (2% of this) that the planet might be able to support if civilisation was abandoned for a return to a hunter-gather existence[3].

I'll summarise my argument from the previous essay. Primitivism generally argues that the development of agriculture was where it all went wrong. It therefore implies we should return to pre-agricultural methods of getting food, that is hunter-gathering. But agriculture allows us to get vastly greater quantities of food from a given area. Estimates can be made of how many people could live on the planet as hunter-gathers based on the amount of food that would be available to them. These estimates suggest a maximum population of around 100 million.

This is what is called an 'Elephant in the living room' argument. The question of what would happen to the other 5,900 million people is so dominant that it makes discussion of the various other claims made by primitivism seem a waste of time until the population question is answered. Yet the only attempts at a response showed a rather touching faith in technology and civilisation, quite a surprise[4]. This response can by summarised as that such population reductions can happen slowly over time because people can be convinced to have fewer or even no children.

There was no attempted explanation for how convincing the 6 billion people of the earth to have no children might go ahead. Programs that advocate lower numbers of children are hardly a new idea. They have already been implemented both nationally and globally without much success. China's infamous 'One Child' program includes a high degree of compulsion but has not even resulted in a population decrease. China's population is forecast to grow by 100 to 250 million by 2025. An explanation of how primitivists hope to achieve by persuasion what others

[3] Note that this is an optimistic maximum — quite often I multiplied the real probable maximum by a figure of ten to avoid pointless arguments as to whether Ireland for instance could support 20,000 hunter gathers rather than the 7,000 my figures would calculate out. I mention this because the folks over at LibCom.org didn't get what I was doing and 'corrected' my error in the edited version they published at www.libcom.org

[4] By this I mean the persuasion mechanism proposed assumes some form of global communication in order to reach everyone on the planet — something that does not yet exist and some form of near 100% reliable contraception that everyone on the planet could have access to — something else that does not yet exist!

have already failed to do by compulsion is needed yet no such attempt to even sketch this out exists.

As if this was not difficult enough for primitivists the implications of other arguments they make turn an impossible task into an even more impossible task. For primitivist arguments normally include the idea that civilisation is about to create a major crisis that will either end, or come close to ending life on the planet. Whether caused by peak oil, global warming or another side effect of technology we are told this crisis is at best a few decades away.

Even if primitivists could magically convince the entire population of the planet to have few or no children this process could only reduce the population over generations. But if a crisis is only decades away there is no time for this strategy. For even if 90% of the population was to be magically convinced tomorrow it would still take decades for the population to reduce to the 100 million or less that could be supported by hunter-gathering. And in the real world there is no mechanism for magically convincing people of any argument — not least one that requires them to ignore what many people find to be a fundamental biological drive to have children. Some of the older primitivists I know even have children themselves. If they can't convince themselves then why do they think they can convince everyone else?

The contradiction between these two positions is so obvious that I can only conclude that those primitivists who have put forward this 'convince everyone to have fewer babies' position have only done so in order to shore up their faith. It is an argument invented to try and hide the elephant in the living room but really it only hides it from themselves. It is impossible to see how they could expect anyone else to find it a convincing answer to the population question.

Zerzan's reply

John Zerzan's reply to my essay included a variation of this defence of primitivism.

> "It could also be noted that population is hardly a given. It seems to be more an effect than a cause, for instance: an effect of domestication *ab origino* (Latin for 'from the beginning/from the source'[5]), if we are talking about civilization. And so it seems to me likely that the numbers might come down fairly quickly were we to move away from domestication. I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight, Flood to the contrary."[6]

Well first off population is a given. I am not imagining that there are 6 billion people on the earth — there are six billion plus on the planet. We cannot simply wish that there were 100 million. There are 6 billion and this is a figure that is forecast to rise. Whatever about the forces that drove the development of agriculture 12,000 years ago (where there is a debate about cause and effect) the reality today is that stopping the cultivation of all domestic plants and animals would result in the death by starvation of 5.9 billion people. So yes a move away from domestication would indeed mean that "numbers might come down fairly quickly": starvation only takes a few months.

Zerzan is also misquoting me. I never claimed that some primitivists said civilisation had to go "overnight". One can see why Zerzan needed to invent this particular red herring, like

[5] What is it with academics and the use of obscure Latin? See my remarks on this in my review of 'Empire' at www.struggle.ws

[6] See note 1.

other primitivists he believes that time is running out. In an interview with fellow primitivist academic Derrick Jensen, Zerzan himself said "in a few decades there won't be much left to fight for. Especially when you consider the acceleration of environmental degradation and personal dehumanization." Again I'll point out if we only have "a few decades" this is hardly the time span in which a 'voluntary' reduction of the earth's population by some 98% could occur. In particular as the Earth's population is actually forecast to rise to perhaps to as much as 10 billion in that time.

The evasive language Zerzan uses in his response to me is typical of the primitivist approach to the population question. And although he might throw out the red herring that "I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight "in the original essay I actually quoted some primitivists who either saw the collapse of civilisation as a short term inevitability or who worse — like Derrick Jensen — wanted to bring it on. As I pointed out in the original article, Jensen is on record as writing "I want civilization brought down and I want it brought down now"[7]. In fact since my article was published he has taken this further with a call for concrete action "We need people to take out dams, and we need people to knock out electrical infrastructures"[8]. So while Zerzan may be smart enough to be evasive on this not all of his followers are[9]. And while Zerzan may have forgotten Jensen he does know him — at least he was interviewed by him in 2000[10] and the 10,000 word interview that was published which would suggest they have at least spent some hours in each others company.

Zerzan, like other primitivists, continues to evade the logic of his own position. It's all very well to talk of a gradual population reduction but just how does he think primitivists are going to achieve a population reduction from 6 billion to 0.1 billion "in a few decades"? What would be gradual about this? This would require a ban on all but 2% of the earth's population having any children at all!

The ball is really in Zerzan's court; he needs to demonstrate a mechanism for a non-compulsory and rapid reduction in population that would require the vast majority of the earth's population to be happy to have no children at all. He needs to explain how he can even explain this message to all of the people in the world — never mind convince them of it. And Zerzan needs a 'voluntary' mechanism of ensuring that those he fails to convince do not undermine this reduction, for instance religious or other minorities who disagree with the primitivists and choose to have many children . And all this has to happen within his own deadline of "a few decades". With this sort of burden of proof it is easy to see why primitivists are not so keen on demonstrating that they have a realistic alternative.

The nasty side

Those not blinded by ideology looking at this burden of proof will conclude either that primitivism is of no practical use or that those primitivists who are rational and still hold to primitivism

[7] Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*, this interview online at crow.riseup.net

[8] Derrick Jensen, Ripping up Asphalt and Planting Gardens, Oct 2005, online at www.raisethehammer.org

[9] It seems fair enough to describe Jensen as a follower of Zerzan as Jensen has described Zerzan as "The best anarchist thinker of our time", "the most important anarchist thinker of our time" or more frankly "I love all of Zerzan's books, but I think I love this one the best." In his review of Zerzan's 'Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections" for Amazon.com

[10] Derrick Jensen interviews John Zerzan , *Alternative Press Review*, at www.altpr.org Given that the Wikipedia

have some program they are not revealing. Quite clearly some of those who see themselves as primitivists do favour die offs or advocate policies that would make them inevitable. Jensen's call for people "to take out dams … to knock out electrical infrastructures" would result in large numbers of deaths if any number of people were to take him seriously. It's just a toned down version of Steve Booth's lauding of the Tokyo Sarin attacks and Booth's fantasy in *Green Anarchist* that "One day the groups will be totally secretive and their methods of fumigation will be completely effective." These sorts of murderous anti-human sentiments are not only tolerated within primitivism but their authors are promoted — you'll find their essays uncritically reproduced all over the web and in various print publications.

My previous essay produced howls of outrage because I pointed out the existence of such writings. But the problem here is not that I point out their existence, it is that the primitivists ignore them until it is pointed out. Yet they work with these people, they publish these people and then they shuffle around with embarrassment and cry unfair when what they say is pointed out. And it is not just the primitivists even sections of the anarchist movement in the name of maintaining a broad church uncritically publish Jensen and invite him to address meetings. This is quite astounding given the consequences of what he is advocating. I can only presume he is tolerated in some anarchist circles because of the general confusion that equates militant tactics with militant politics, forgetting that elements of the far right can also use militant tactics.

There is no critique of the die off point of view from those who call themselves 'anarcho'-primitivists. Zerzan is happy to do a lengthy interview with someone who says he wants "civilization brought down and I want it brought down now" without even bringing the consequences of such a position up with them. If he wanted to distance himself from Jensen he has already had the opportunity to do so.

The centrality of the agricultural revolution

Elsewhere Zerzan has written of the development of agriculture that;

> "The debasing of life in all spheres, now proceeding at a quickening pace, stems from the dynamics of civilization itself. Domestication of animals and plants, a process only 10,000 years old, has penetrated every square inch of the planet. The result is the elimination of individual and community autonomy and health, as well as the rampant, accelerating destruction of the natural world"[11]

This is relevant because a number of people who replied objected to me choosing the development of agriculture as the point at which civilisation can be said to have developed[12]. But as the original essay explained, "Of course civilization is a rather general term .. For the purposes

entry on 'anarcho' primitivism includes "in the United States primitivism has been notably advocated by writer John Zerzan and to a lesser extent author Derrick Jensen" I find Zerzan's implied claim in his reply to me to have forgotten Jensen and what he has to say incredible — but maybe they have fallen out?

[11] Globalisation and its apologists. An abolitionist perspective, by John Zerzan, online at www.insurgentdesire.org.uk

[12] Teapolitik in the third comment on the AnarchistNews posting and in some of the other places my original essay was posted e.g. www.livejournal.com Teapolitik also says "I am not a primitivist" in some versions of this reply. Joe Licentia who also says "I'm not a primitivist" also questions my equating of agriculture with civilisation in his 'Critique of "Civilisation, Primitivism and anarchism" online at question-everything.mahost.org

of this article I'm taking as a starting point that the form of future society that primitivists argue for would be broadly similar in technological terms to that which existed around 12,000 years ago on earth, at the dawn of the agricultural revolution". I could have picked an older date — the first cave paintings for instance but this would not only have been more arbitrary but would have presented an even greater population problem for the primitivists.

I could have picked a more recent date but this would hardly have helped the primitivists as they then would have had to include many of the features of civilisation — including the state — in their primitive utopia. And, as our ability to support a large population has escalated sharply in recent years, even a 'primitive' society that only aimed to return to say, 1800 would still have to get rid of the majority of the earth's population. Evasion aside, it is quite clear that from the primitivist point of view it was the agricultural revolution and the changes that happened alongside this where things went bad.

For understandable reasons (not wanting to deal with the population question) primitivists and their fellow travellers tend to avoid any date even as general as the agricultural revolution. But it's the one I choose to work with and this appears to be fair enough with those primitivists more willingly to openly argue their position. Agriculture also seems a very logical starting point because agriculture is what makes a mass society possible. Hunter-gathers can't gather in large groups for a long period because they exhaust local food sources. Nor do small groups of hunter-gathers generally have the surplus food required to develop a high degree of specialisation of labour, and any specialisation is a bad thing according to most primitivists.

I also think its hard to construct a coherent primitivism that does not exclude agriculture since the dawn of agriculture and class society seem to occur together. This fact has been understood on the left at least as far back as Engels 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' and I'll discuss its implications next. But in terms of the overall argument about food production this is a side argument — the earths current population requires the agricultural technology of the last 100 odd years — going back to primitive agriculture is not much more of an option then going back to Hunter-gathering. It would still leave billions of facing death by starvation.

Is primitivism a branch of anarchism?

It is true that agriculture is required before the surplus is generated on which a state structure can be built. This is about the only argument the primitivists have — the state has always been a feature of civilisation. The challenge for those who want to abolish the state — and this has always been understood as a central challenge of anarchism from the 1860's — is to create a civilisation that does not have the mechanisms of state repression that all civilisations to date have had.

This brings me onto another issue that upset some of those who wrote replies to my essay. Teapolitik's "Primitivism isn't, in itself, a critique of anarchism at all. It is a supplement to anarchism" is the best-developed expression of this sort of reply. Teapolitik goes on to assert that "…civilization (and for some, technology, agriculture, language, and other products of human society) is not compatible with ecological sustainability — and that the persistence of civilization, whether feudal, capitalist, socialist or anarchist, would lead to the eventual destruction of the life-sustaining qualities of this planet."[13]

[13] See preceding note.

I think the case for primitivism being a break with rather than a development of anarchism is very clear — I outlined this at some length in my original article. The primitivist argument is essentially identical to the liberal argument for why the state is necessary. The state they claim is what allows mass society to exist — without the state we would have 'the war of all against all'. The primitivists agree but as they are anti-state they are therefore required to also be anti-mass society. Yet the origins of anarchism lie in a movement that sought to go beyond this seeming contradiction — a movement built on the idea that you could have a free society without the state. This was the ideological corner stone on which anarchism is founded.

Bakunin, for instance writing on Rousseau's Theory of the State, wrote in words that are as applicable to the core argument of primitivism as they were at the time to liberalism that;

> "According to the theory .. primitive men enjoying absolute liberty only in isolation are antisocial by nature. When forced to associate they destroy each other's freedom. If this struggle is unchecked it can lead to mutual extermination." But for anarchists "it is now proven that no state could exist without committing crimes, or at least without contemplating and planning them, even when its impotence should prevent it from perpetrating crimes, we today conclude in favour of the absolute need of destroying the states. Or, if it is so decided, their radical and complete transformation so that, ceasing to be powers centralised and organised from the top down, by violence or by authority of some principle, they may recognise — with absolute liberty for all the parties to unite or not to unite, and with liberty for each of these always to leave a union even when freely entered into — from the bottom up, according to the real needs and the natural tendencies of the parties, through the free federation of individuals, associations, communes, districts, provinces, and nations within humanity."[14]

Bakunin's argument is that liberals insist that large numbers of people cannot live together without a state to supervise them as they would come into conflict with each other. But anarchists insist that large numbers of people can come together and preserve their freedom though a range of bottom up organising methods. Mass society and freedom are possible. This is something primitivists deny.

In a similar vein Kropotkin wrote;

> "recent evolution…has prepared the way for showing the necessity and possibility of a higher form of social organisation that may guarantee economic freedom without reducing the individual to the role of a slave to the State. The origins of government have been carefully studied, and all metaphysical conceptions as to its divine or "social contract" derivation having been laid aside, it appears that it is among us of a relatively modern origin, and that its powers have grown precisely in proportion as the division of society into the privileged and unprivileged classes was growing in the course of ages"[15]

Here Kroptkin is arguing that humanity can create forms of mass organisation that do not require the state and which can create economic freedom. And while the liberals may argue that

[14] Bakunin in Rousseau's Theory of the State online at dwardmac.pitzer.edu

[15] Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles by Peter Kropotkin online at www.zabalaza.net

the state is required for the existence of mass society this seems to be a recent argument invented to justify the division of society into classes.

As can be seen — from the beginning — anarchism has included a rejection of the core idea of primitivism — that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between mass society and liberty. It has sought alternative ways to organize mass society that eliminate the role of the state. For these "free federation of individuals, associations, communes, districts, provinces, and nations within humanity" are all features of mass society. In the 1860's the argument that there was such an irreconcilable contradiction was an anti-anarchist argument — one that the anarchists took the time to refute. To try and incorporate the same argument into anarchism today is to make nonsense of the term anarchism.

For some reason there is a very strong tendency in the USA for the emergence of ideologies which use the label anarchist but which are in reality at odds with anarchism. There have been at least three such streams in the last two decades, 'anarcho'-capitalism, post-leftism and 'anarcho'-primitivism. All three have used a similar methodology of trying to re-label anarchism as 'left anarchism' (or sometimes 'red anarchism'). All three have shared the same ideological anti-communist 'rugged individualism' by which all forms of collective mass organisation can only be authoritarian.

It is hard not to write this off as simply a radical reflections of the state ideology of the USA. In the case of primitivism it also accepts George Bush's claims that USA society has to have the car culture. For Bush this means the USA has to sacrifice the environment in order to maintain its current standard of living. Primitivism accepts the first claim but unlike Bush rejects the price as too great to carry. So primitivism seeks the end of civilization itself. Like Bush it also seems unwilling to admit that elsewhere on the planet people already organise their lives in ways that have a much lower energy demand. Even Western Europe which has a similar standard of living to the USA has per person a use of energy half that of the USA.

Technology

The technology question causes a huge amount of confusion with primitivists mixing up a particular form or consequence of technology with the technology itself. I had tried to deal with this in the original essay using the example of motorised transport. Yet some replies were from people in the USA who couldn't get their heads around the idea of the technology of motorised transport being used in any other way than the way it is used in the USA. There it is perhaps more reasonable for someone to believe that *"car culture could not be likely eliminated without destroying civilisation"*[16]. US culture and urban geography means that right now there are huge areas of the country where owning a car is pretty essential to survival.

But this isn't typical of the rest of the world, not even of parts of the US. If you lived in Manhattan for instance, for day-to-day life a car is more of a problem then a requirement. People across huge areas of the planet have a very low percentage of car ownership — in the most part because people are too poor to afford individual cars. Yet those with money still have access to mass transportation. If you go anywhere in North Africa you can travel long distances rapidly and at ease, reaching even quite small towns because the lack of individual car ownership has created a market for an incredibly sophisticated network of collective taxis. They leave from fixed

[16] E.g. Heretic posting on the infoshop.org posting of the original essay — online at www.infoshop.org

points in each town whenever a vehicle is full. Really busy routes also have trains and buses. The point is that even under capitalism alternative ways of dealing with the need for transportation already exist — there is nothing inevitable about the 'car culture' that is a feature of how the technology of the internal combustion engine has been used in the USA.

Some of the replies focused on my treatment of technology and in particular the contention that the only way out of the population crisis is both more technology and more access to technology. Unsurprisingly, as I used the peak oil theory in the original essay this resulted in discussion on some of the sites dedicated to discussing Peak Oil. Omar for instance thought this means I "argue technology as the saviour"[17] — others even thought this meant I was in favour of atomic weapons!

These misunderstandings are probably my fault for stating the case too crudely in the original. It is worth deepening the discussion. My position it that the combination of modern capitalism and the way it uses technology has given us an unstable and unsustainable economic system that only even attempts to address the interests of a small minority of the planets population. And although I may not believe 'the end is nigh' I do accept that things cannot go on as they are without major problems.

Of course being an anarchist I already want to overthrow capitalism and see the economy restructured from top to bottom. So saying things cannot continue as they are presents me with no difficulties. However unlike some Peak Oil enthusiasts and all primitivists I am not willing to argue that we need to 'go back' to some simpler time when less energy inputs were required because that would involve accepting the removal of billions of people from the planet.

A social revolution that not only introduces new technology but re-models what already exists is the only logical way forward. In that context technology is what we do with it. In the general sense it is neither liberatory nor repressive. Particular applications of technology may be either — a rifle in the hands of a US marine is different in that sense from a rifle in the hands of a Zapatista. The birth control pill certainly plays a part in giving women choices about reproduction that were previously hard to come by safely. It also allows here to control her fertility without the co-operation of her partner. On the other hand it is impossible to think of a positive use of the electric chair or a nuclear bomb.

It is also true that the development of technology made it possible to have a society where there was a division into workers and bosses. Once you can store surplus food for instance you can have accumulation of meaningful wealth and so the ability to pay the soldier, the policeman and the executioner. So the question comes down to whether it's possible to have a free technological society — and anarchism insists it is — or whether the choice is between a primitive 'freedom' and an oppressive technological society.

The vast majority of political theories, perhaps all except anarchism, do indeed claim you cannot have a free technological society. I think it is worth hoping they are wrong even if we have never as yet had such a society. That a free technological society is possible is — as I have argued — the central point of anarchism.

[17] online at peakoil.com

Some of the odder stuff

The replies also included areas that in my view are of much lesser importance[18]. Amongst those are responses from some who attempt to blend primitivism into vegetarianism or even veganism[19]. This really only serves to underline how some primitivists have not really given any serious thought to what they advocate at all — very few ecosystems could support vegan humans attempting to live off the land without agriculture. As far as I'm aware all 'primitive' societies that exist today on the planet carry out hunting as well as gathering.

In this context I am indeed a "damn speciesist" who doesn't have a problem with humans "exploiting the land for you own good (taking away vital habitat and feeding ground)". Ecological diversity should be preserved because it is in our ability to do so and doing so will be good for us rather than because we prefer trees to people or because otherwise the earth will be upset. All actually existing 'primitive' peoples are "speciesist" — they hunt animals. The luxury of some people choosing not to eat meat at all is a feature of civilization.

Abstract or symbolic — who cares?

I'll also deal with the remainder of Zerzan's reply to my original essay here as he is the the leading light of 'anarcho' primitivism and I'd hate people to think I was avoiding part of his argument.. The remainder of his reply reads;

> *"Flood probably knows that nowhere have I rejected "abstract thought" but it better serves his weak assault on "primitivism" to say otherwise. Some of our ancestors were cooking with fire 2 million years ago, travelling on the open seas 800,000 years ago. And yet the evidence for symbolic culture hardly goes back 40,000 years. Thus, it would seem, there was intelligence that preceded what we think of as symbolic. Possibly a more direct kind in keeping with a more direct connection with the natural world. Well, this is a long topic that I won't try to rehash here. One that doesn't quite fit Flood's sound byte characterization..."*[20]

This section appears to be a reply to where I was explaining my methodology in choosing 'agriculture' as representing the start of civilization. I'd actually mentioned Zerzan only twice in the original article. Why might I have thought Zerzan rejected 'abstract thought'? Well partly because I had presumed "symbolic thought" and "abstract thought" pretty much amounted to the same thing. But in any case Zerzan has also appeared to specifically attack "abstract thought". In his essay on "Number: Its Origin and Evolution"[21] he writes, "Math is the paradigm of abstract thought" and then "Mathematics is reified, ritualized thought, the virtual abandonment of think-

[18] For instance I'm not terribly interested in critiques like that of Heineken (at peakoil.com) who worry about my "educational background and therefore of the authoritativeness of your commentary". He asserts that "many writers like Flood do not seem to have much training in biology or ecology" as if this should exclude anyone from commenting on such issues. They are just another version of the sort of anonymous comment left on Anarchist News that asserted "who by now, doesn't know that andrew flood is an idiot? .. try not to innundate this board with such obviously superceded nonsense as just about everything written by flood and his cretinous supporters."

[19] Vegan Hobo — www.anarkismo.net

[20] See preceding note.

[21] 'Number: Its Origin and Evolution' at www.primitivism.com

ing". To me this — and similar sentiments along the same lines elsewhere in his essay — sound a lot like a rejection of abstract thought.

In his reply he also seems keen to tell me you can have intelligence without "symbolic culture". I can only agree — geese for instance manage to migrate large distances but don't as far as I'm aware produce any art. But he may be wrong that evidence for symbolic culture in humans only goes back 40,000 years. Ian Watts of University College London claims red ochre and other red pigments were being used at least 100,000 and 120,000 years ago and that "new findings in Zambia and the re-dating of the important Border Cave site in South Africa push the date of the earliest use back further still-perhaps to 170,000 years ago in Zambia."[22] Given that the "oldest fossil evidence for anatomically modern humans is about 130,000 years old"[23] this would suggest symbolic culture (or symbolic thought) is as old as *homo sapiens*.

Anyway, to be honest, I'm all for abstract thought. I like the ability to read a text, to think about its contents and perhaps then to argue against it. This ability is what is needed to create freedom, it has been at the centre of all modern revolutionary processes. Even if we could, why would we want to give up the ability to think abstractly?

Class conflict?

Teapolitik and other commentators take issue with me pointing out that even if a major environmental crisis resulted in large-scale death and destruction this would not necessarily mean the end of capitalism. Teapolitik asserts that "A 'tiny wealthy elite' could not possibly continue to control vast natural resources in the event of collapse — when one elite can no longer hold a carrot in front of thousands of poor, those poor will revolt." This assertion is wishful thinking for two reasons — not least that the ruling class has seldom maintained power through dangling the carrot alone.

Firstly it presumes that the crisis will somehow creep up on the ruling class — that they will be unable to react or prepare for it. Capitalism is very much more adaptable than this. For example there has been a huge amount of research on alternative energy sources over the last few years as some capitalists anticipate making a substantial profit out of peak oil. On flicking through a recent issue of the 'Economist' magazine — which is close to being a bible for many CEO's — I noticed that 6 out of the dozen or so glossy full page ads were to do with alternatives to oil or energy saving technologies like hybrid cars. The transnational corporation BP (British Petroleum) Amoco rebranded itself Beyond Petroleum back in the year 2000. Although this was rightly seen as at attempt to Greenwash it was also to manovure itself for the new energy markets that would open up as oil declined.

On a more local scale the large scale destruction from Hurricane Katrina is actually being used by capitalism to restructure parts of the New Orleans economy in their interests. Anarcho has written that Bush's plans for New Orleans amount to a;

> "blank sheet upon which the far-right will unleash their plans for social engineering. Children will go to school with vouchers. Wages will be lowered and regulations waived to accommodate the bosses. The entire area will become a free-enterprise

[22] 'Painted Ladies', *New Scientist* Oct 2001, online at homepages.uel.ac.uk

[23] www.mnh.si.edu

> zone. A flat tax will be imposed. All under the guise of economic revival premised on the belief that corporations freed from trades unions, workers rights, environmental restrictions and taxes will reap huge profits and those profits will grow the pie for everybody"[24].

This is the way capitalism works — crisis are opportunities for new investment for those companies in favour (e.g. Halliburton in Iraq) and excuses to impose cuts on the working class (e.g. the introduction of the bin tax in Dublin). Mass death and destruction have often been a central part of the development of capitalism — not a threat to it. For capitalism they can be opportunities to remove 'unproductive people' from the land. (e.g. Irish famine of the 1840's). Much of the original wealth on which capitalism was founded was part and parcel of the process that almost entirely wiped out the indigenous people of the America's. Today tens of millions of people die every year from diseases that are easily preventable.

There is also nothing automatic about poverty or a decline in living standards being met with mass revolt. Capitalism, and the market in particular, is also an inbuilt mechanism though which the population are encouraged to accept the hoarding of scarce resources as natural. In the west today this means the rich have access to fast cars, luxury homes and private yachts — not that much of a hardship for the rest of us. But elsewhere in the world the rich have access to these things while the poor literally starve in the streets. If there was to be a real crisis in world food production then this is what would visit the working class in the USA and beyond. To a minor extent this is what happened in depression era America and in post war Europe. In neither case did it lead to significant revolts never mind the collapse of civilisation.

The second reason why a major crisis would not automatically lead to the fall of capitalism is more brutal. The need to spell it out simply reflects the rather naive thinking of a lot of primitivists when it comes to the ruthless nature of capitalism. Jay Gould the US financier & railroad businessman summed up this nature when he said, "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." Outside of a recent brief period in Western Europe and the USA capitalism has routinely deployed enormous repressive forces to defeat rebellion. In the 1970's it created military dictatorships, which killed tens of thousands of people across South America. In Central America in the 1980's it killed hundreds of thousands.

There have been moments in history when the ruling class was at least briefly defeated — the Russian and Spanish revolutions being the most common examples. But this was not a simple product of desperation — if desperation led to revolution than revolution would have swept the African ruling class away years ago. It was also a product of revolutionary organisation stretching over decades and a set of revolutionary ideas that could unite people in the struggle for a better world. Large-scale crisis can indeed bring about large-scale upheavals but without a positive revolutionary program that unites people such upheavals always end up with a new faction of the ruling class in the driving seat. In fact capitalism and the ruling class are so flexible that they can undergo apparent defeat only to end up back in control in a new form within years — as happened in Russia after 1917.

So yes, unless we are organised on a mass scale a "tiny wealthy elite" will indeed "continue to control vast natural resources in the event of collapse". They have hundreds of years of experience of doing just that. And they won't just use the much-depleted carrot to do so, they also have the

[24] The real looting of New Orleans begins online at www.anarkismo.net

stick and for much of world history it is the stick rather than the carrot that has had the lead role in keeping people in line. Technological developments mean one man in a helicopter can provide the same level of 'stick' that previously an army of hundreds was required for. They can still hire one half of the working class to kill the other half but in repression as with other areas these days they are able to downsize.

Hope for the future

Primitivism offers no hope and no program for a revolutionary change of society. It includes some of the most reactionary and anti-human writings this side of fascism — I've even read primitivists writing off the death of the mass of the worlds population on the grounds that "quite a few of those 5.9 billion are just empty shells"[25]. But even the best of the writings offer no more than some interesting ideas to ponder over — ideas that have been around for the last 200 years.

There are real problems associated with the growth of the human population and the wasteful nature of capitalism. We are already seeing the emergence of long-term environmental problems even if the end is not yet nigh. But bad as the effects on the environment are, the real shame is that we live on a planet where millions starve in order that a tiny ruling class can live in absolute luxury.

Anarchism offers an alternative to the capitalist system — an alternative that can provide a decent life for everyone on the planet both in terms of material good and control over their own lives. But achieving this alternative is not a question of waiting for people to rise up — it is a question of organising the vast majority of the planet against the tiny elite who rule us.

Anarchist communism provides the best hope for freedom and the best model for fighting for freedom. It distils the lessons of hundreds of years of struggle — and of all the successes and failing of these struggles. It does not have 'the answer'; that is something that can only be created by the self-managed struggle of the mass of the population of this planet. Our role is to help the emergence of this struggle.

[25] Anon in the debate about Jensen at anarchistnews.org

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<libcom.org/thought/anarcho-primitivism-anti-civilisation-criticism>,
<anarkismo.net/article/1451>, <anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=1890> &
<web.archive.org/…/anarchistnews.org/?q=node/200>