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Primitives and Extropians

Hakim Bey

The anarcho-primitivists have backed themselves into a situation where they can never be satisfied without the total dissolution of the totality. Luddism as a tactic has much to recommend it: — on the local level, machine-smashing can actually accomplish something. Even one or two nuclear reactors have been shut down by “sabotage” (legal, political, or actual) — and one can always gain at least a moment of satisfaction with a wooden shoe or a monkey wrench. On a “global” level however — the “strategic” level — the totality of the neo-primitive critique of the totality itself begins to take on a disturbing air of — totalitarianism. This can be seen most clearly in certain strains of “deep” ecology and “ecofascism”, but it remains an inherent problem even in the most “left-wing” strains of primitivism. The puritan impulse — purification, the realization of purity — imparts a certain rigidity and aggression to all possible actions on behalf of such a total critique. This must seem especially the case when the critique extends beyond, say, urban civilization (or “History”) into the “prehistoric” realm of art, music, techné, language, and symbolic mediation itself. Short of some hypothetically “natural” evolution (or devolution) of the very species, how precisely is such purity to be attained?

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Primitivism in effect has proposed an absolute category — the “primitive” itself — which assumes the function of a metaphysical principle. Of course the primitive in its “true essence” remains beyond definition (beyond symbolic mediation), but until mediation itself is abolished, the primitive must assume (in relation to all other possible totalities) the philosophical trappings of an imperative, and even of “doctrine”. This brings us perilously close to the notorious violence of the sacred. The deepest of this violence is directed at the self, since the reification of the eschaton (either in the future or the past) precisely devalues the present, the “place” where we are actually living our everyday lives. But invariably the violence must be directed outwardly as well. Fine, you say: — let the shit come down. Yet the successful resolution of the violence (i.e., the total abolition of symbolic mediation) can logically be defined only by a presumptive vanguard of the “pure”. The principle of hierarchy has thus reappeared — but hierarchy contradicts the initial premises of primitivism. This, I believe, can be called a tragic contradiction. On the level of the individual and of everyday life such a contradiction can only manifest as ineffectuality and bitterness.

By contrast, the anarcho-Extropian or futurians are also forced to reify the eschaton — since the present is obviously not the utopia of techné they envision — by placing perfection in a future where symbolic mediation has abolished hierarchy, rather than in a past where such mediation has not yet appeared (the ideal Paleolithic of the primitivists). Obviously for the Extropians, mediation per se cannot be defined as “impurity” or as the invariable source of separation, alienation, and hierarchy. Nevertheless, it remains obvious that such separation does in fact occur, that it amounts to immiseration, that it is bound up in some way with techné and mediation, that not all technology is “liberating” according to any anarchist definition of the term, and that some of it is downright oppressive. The Extropian therefore lacks and

in both their models, but can't for even a moment believe in either of them as totalities. Their futurity or eschatology bores me, unless I can mix it into the stew of the TAZ — or use it to magic the TAZ into active existence — to tease the TAZ into action. The TAZ is “broad-minded” enough to entertain more than two, or even six, impossible ideas “before breakfast”. The TAZ is always “bigger” than the mere ideas which inspire it. Even at its smallest and most intimate the TAZ englobes all “totalities”, and packs them into the same kaleidoscope conceptual space, the “imaginal world” which is always so closely related to the TAZ, and which burns with the same fire. My brain may not be able to reconcile the wilderness and cyberspace, but the TAZ can do so — in fact, has already done so. And yet the TAZ is no totality, but merely a leaky sieve — which, in the fairy tale, can carry milk or even become a boat. For the TAZ, technology is like that paper fan in the Zen story, which first becomes a “fan”, then a device for scooping cake, and finally a silent breeze.

needs a critique of technology, and of the incredibly complex relation between the social and the technical. No one with any intelligence can any longer accept the notion of technology as “morally neutral”, with control of the means of production the only criteria for valuation. The social and the technological are somehow bound in a complex relation of co-creation (or “co-evolution”), such that techné shapes cognition even as cognition shapes techné. If the extropian vision of the future is viable it cannot depend on “machine evolution” alone to achieve realization. But unless anarcho-futurism can develop a critique of technology, it is relegated precisely to this passive role. Invariably a dialectic of “good” machines and “evil” machines is developed, or rather of good and evil modes of social-technological relations. This rather manichaeian world view however fails to eliminate or even plaster over the contradictions which arise from such premises, and which revolve around the “bad-fit” between human values and machine “logic”, human autonomy and machine autonomy. As M. de Landa pints out, the autonomous machine derives from and defines the war machine (Taylor developed “Taylorism” while working in an arsenal). Extropianism has marked “cyberspace” as the area of struggle for “good” human/machine relations (e.g. the InterNet), and this struggle has taken on the aspect of a resistance against the “militarization” of cyberspace, its hierarchization as an “Information Highway” under centralized management. But what if cyberspace itself is by definition a mode of separation and a manifestation of “machine logic”? What if the disembodiment inherent in any appearance within cyberspace amounts to an alienation from precisely that sphere of everyday life which extropianism hopes to transform and purge of its miseries? If this were so, the results might very well resemble the dystopian situations envisioned by P. K. Dick and W. Gibson; — turned inward, this violent sense of contradiction would evoke the kind of futility and melancholia these writers depict. Directed outward, the

violence would conjure up other SciFi models such as those of R. Heinlein or F. Herbert, which equate “freedom” with the culture of a technological elite.

Now, when I talk about “the return of the Paleolithic” I find myself leaning toward the primitivist position — and have consequently been criticized by extropians for luddoid reaction, nostalgia, and technophobia. However, when I talk about (say) the potential use of the InterNet in organizing a TAZ, I begin to tilt a little toward my old SciFi enthusiasms and sound a bit like an extropian — and have consequently been criticized by primitivists for being “soft on technology” (like some sort of melting watch by Dali), seduced by techno-optimism, by the illusion that separation can overcome separation. Both these criticisms are correct to some degree, inasmuch as my inconsistency results from an attempt to think about techné and society without any recourse to an inviolate system of absolute categories. On the one hand, most of my thinking about technology was shaped by the radical ad-hoc-ism and briocologie theory of the 60’s and 70’s, the “appropriate tech” movement, which accepts the de facto link between techné and human society, but looks for appropriate ways to shape situations toward low-cost/maximal-pleasure tendencies. In fiction a model is attempted by B. Sterling in his short-story “Green Days in Brunei”, a brilliant imagining of low-tech non-authoritarian solutions to “3rd world” over-population and poverty. In “real” life a smaller but most exquisite model is provided by the New Alchemy Institute, which turns polluted sinkholes into arcadian springs with low green technologies in cheap installations which are aesthetically beautiful. On the other hand, I prefer the burden of inconsistency (even “foolish” inconsistency) to the burden of the Absolute.

Only an impure theory can do justice to the impunity of the present — which, as everyone knows, is only a psychological impossibility caught between a lost past and a non-existent future. “Everyday life” is not a category — even “the

syndicalist, council communist, post-situationist, primitivist, extropian and other “free” tendencies. This “union”-without-uniformity will not be driven (or riven) by ideology, but by a kind of insurrectionary “noise” or chaos of TAZ’s, uprisings, refusals, and epiphanies. Into the “final” totality of global capital it will release a hundred blooming flowers, a thousand, a million memes of resistance, of difference, of non-ordinary consciousness — the will to power as “strangeness”. And as capital retreats deeper and deeper into cyberspace, or into disembodiment, leaving behind itself the empty shells of spectacular control, our complexity of anti-authoritarian and autonomist tendencies will begin to see the re-appearance of the Social.

But at this present moment the TAZ (in its broadest possible sense) seems to be the only manifestation of the possibility of radical conviviality. Every non-authoritarian tendency should support the TAZ because only there (aside from the imagination) can an authentic taste of life without oppression be experienced. The vital question now concerns the “technology” of the TAZ, i.e., the means for potentiating and manifesting it most clearly and strongly. Compared to this question, the problems of technology (or of zero-technology) take on an air of theological debate — a ghostly and querulous other-worldliness. My critics have a point — but it’s aimed somewhere about 10,000 years in the past, or “five minutes into the future”, and misses the mark.

I must admit that my own taste inclines neither toward Wilderness World nor spaceship Earth as exclusive categories. I actually spend far more time defending wildness than “civilization”, because it is far more threatened. I yearn for the re-appearance of Nature out of Culture — but not for the eradication of all symbolic mediation. The word “choice” has been so devalued lately. Let’s say I’d prefer a world of indeterminacy, of rich ambiguity, of complex impurities. My critics, apparently, do not. I find much to admire and desire

that separation can overcome separation. But I do hypothesize the possibility of a much more immediate and satisfactory experience of creation and conviviality through the human (animal/animate) scaling of economy and technology — and this, however untidy, I would call utopia.

If I have disagreed with both primitives and extropians here, it was not to reject them as allies. The only useful purpose served by our “after the Revolution” game is to shed light on our present situation, and our possible options for concrete action here and now (more or less). It seems to me that both the P’s and E’s are quite capable of grasping the theory of “messiness” and the “impure” model of the TAZ. A night, a week, a month of relative autonomy, relative satisfaction, relative realization, would be worth far more to most anarchists than a whole lifetime of absolute bitterness, resentment, and nostalgia for the past or future. The most enthusiastic cyberpunk can still embrace the “festal body”, and the most savage primitives have been known to succumb to civilized impurities such as beer, or art. I fear that a few diehards in both camps will still sneer at our enjoyment — of the impure TAZ or the impure uprising — because it falls short of the perfect revolution. But realization arises only from direct experience, from participation. They themselves admit this. And yet action is always impure, always incomplete. Are they too fastidious? Will nothing suit them both the void — wither of wilderness, or of cyberspace? Are they dandies of the Absolute?

The TAZ project is one of indiscriminate syncretism, not of exclusion. By disagreeing with both parties we are attempting to reconcile them — at least pro tem — to a sort of “united front” or ad hoc tendency, determined to experiment now with various modes of contestation as well as enjoyment, of struggle as well as celebration. The palimpsest of all utopian theories and desires — including all redundancies and repetitions — forms the matrix of an anti-authoritarian movement capable of “lumping together” the mess of anarchist, libertarian,

body” is not a category. Life — and the body — are “full of holes”, permeable, grotesque — ad hoc constructions already compromised with an impure empiricism, fated to “drift”, to “relativism”, and to the sheer messiness of the organic. And yet it is “precisely” here, in this imprecise area of contradiction and “vulgar existentialism”, that the creative act of autonomy and self-actualization must be accomplished. Critiques can be directed at the past or future, but praxis can only occur in the impure and ontologically unstable here-and-now. I don’t want to abandon the critique of past-and-future — in fact I need it, in the form of a utopian poetics, in order to situate praxis in the context of a tradition (of festivity and of resistance) and of an anti-tradition (of utopian “hope”). But I cannot allow this critique to harden into an eschatology. I ask of theory that it remain flexible in regard to situations, and able to define values in terms of “the struggle for empirical freedoms” (as one modern-day Zapatista put it). “Revolution” no less than Religion has been guilty of promising “pie in the sky” (as Joe Hill put it) — but the real problem of theory is (as Alice put it) “jam today.” The concept of the TAZ was never intended as an abandonment of past or future — the TAZ existed, and will exist — but rather as a means to maximize autonomy and pleasure for as many individuals and groups as possible as soon as possible — even here and now. The TAZ exists — the purpose of the theory has been simply to notice it, help it to define itself, become “politically conscious”. The past and future help us to know our “true” (revolutionary) desires — but only the present can realize them — only the living body, for all its grotesque imperfection.

Suppose we were to ask — as anarchists — what should be done about the problem of technology “after the revolution”. This exercise in utopian poetics may help us to clarify the question of desire, and of praxis in the “present”. The primitivist might argue that there can be no revolution without the abolition of symbolic mediation, or at least of the technological

imperative; extropians might say that no revolution can occur without technological transcendence. But both parties must perforce admit a transitional stage, when de facto power has been seized by the “Revolution”, but the full unfolding of revolutionary society has yet to occur. Let’s imagine that the one rough principle agreed upon by “everyone” is the freedom of the individual from coercion by the group, and the freedom of the (self-organized) group from coercion by all other groups. The only “price” of this freedom is that it damage no other free and autonomous interests. This would seem to be a minimalist but adequate definition of basic anarchism. At this point the primitivist may hold that the dialectic of freedom moves irrevocably toward the re-appearance of the Paleolithic, albeit at a “higher” and more conscious level than the first time around, since this re-appearance will have been announced by revolution, by consciousness. Similarly at this point the extropian may argue that the further unfolding of freedom can only be envisioned as self-directed evolution through the co-creation of humanity and its technology. Fine and dandy. But now what? Are these two anarchist tendencies going to become armies and fight it out to the last recalcitrant computer jock or neo-wild-man? Are they going to force their visions of the future on each other? Would such action be consistent with the basic anarchist premise of — mutual non-coercion? Or would it reveal each of these tendencies to be flawed by destructive and tragic contradictions? I’ve said before that in such a situation, the problem of technology can be solved only by the principle of revolutionary desire. Since we’ve “ruled out” coercion of all those who accept the premise of mutual non-coercion, all competing models of utopia are submitted to the crucible of desire. How much do I want a computer? I can’t force Taiwanese and Mexican women to make silicon chips for slave wages. I can’t pollute other peoples’ air with some outrageous plastic factory to make consoles. I’m free to have a computer, but I must meet the price of mutual non-coercion. Or — how much do I want the

wilderness? I can’t force people to get out of “my” forest now because it’s also “their” forest. I can do what I want with “my share” of the forest, but only at the agreed-upon price. If my neighbors desire to plant wheat, or hand-craft fine computers, so long as they respect my “Nature” I must respect their “Culture”. Of course we may wrangle about “acceptable emission standards” or forest preservation — about the appropriateness of a given technological or non-technological “solution” in a given situation — but we will accept the price of mutual non-coercion in the form of mess and compromise, impurity and imperfection — because “empirical freedoms” are worth more to us than categorical imperatives.

Of course, everyone if free to play this game of utopian poetics with different “rules”, and different results. After all, the future does not exist. However, I would like to push the implications of my thought-experiment a bit further. I suspect that this “utopia” would prove disappointing to both the primitives and the extropians. I suspect that a workable utopia would adhere more closely to the “messy” model than to either of the “pure” models of the pro-tech/anti-tech theorists. Like bolo’bolo, I imagine a complex multiplicity of social models co-existing under the voluntary aegis of the social “price” of mutual non-coercion. In effect the primitivists will get less wilderness than they demand, and the extropians will get less tech. Nevertheless, all but the most fanatical extremists on either side will be reconciled to the messy utopia of desire — or so I predict — because it will be organized around pleasure and surplus, rather than the denial and scarcity expressed by the totality. The desire for wilderness will be gratified at a level undreamed since the early Neolithic, and the desire for creativity and even co-creation will be gratified at a level undreamed by the wildest science fiction. In both cases the means for this enjoyment can only be called appropriate techné — green, low energy, high information. I don’t believe in the abolition of symbolic mediation, and I don’t believe