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The Left? No Thanks!

John Zerzan

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It isn't that there's no energy afoot in the world. On any given day on any continent, one can see anti-government riots; direct actions in support of animal liberation or to protect the earth; concerted efforts to resist the building of dams, superhighways, industrial installations; prison uprisings; spontaneous outbreaks of targeted vandalism by the fed-up and pissed-off; wildcat strikes; and the energy of countless infoshops, zines, primitive skills camps, schools, and gatherings; radical reading groups, Food Not Bombs, etc. The list of oppositional acts and alternative projects is very considerable.

What isn't happening is the Left. Historically, it has failed monumentally. What war, depression or ecocide did it ever prevent? The Left now exists mainly as a fading vehicle of protest in, say, the electoral circuses that fewer and fewer believe in anyway. It hasn't been a source of inspiration in many decades. It is dying out.

The Left is in our way and needs to go.

The juice today is with anarchy. For about ten years now it has become steadily clearer that kids with passion and intelligence are anarchists. Progressives, socialists, communists are grey-headed and do not turn on youth. Some recent writings

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by leftists (e.g. Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*) express the hope that anarchy will revive the Left, so in need of reviving. This seems to me unlikely.

And what is anarchy today? This is the most important story, in my opinion. A basic shift has been underway for a while, one that has been quite under-reported for fairly obvious reasons.

Traditional or classical anarchism is as outmoded as the rest of the Left. It is not at all part of the oft-noticed surge of interest in anarchy. Note the usage here: it isn't anarchism that is moving forward, but anarchy. Not a closed, Eurocentric ideology but an open, no-holds-barred questioning and resisting.

The dominant order has shown itself to be amazingly flexible, able to co-opt or recuperate countless radical gestures and alternative approaches. Because of this, something deeper is called for, something that can't be contained within the system's terms. This is the primary reason for the failure of the Left: if the basics are not challenged at a deep level, co-optation is guaranteed. Anarchism, until now, has not left the orbit of capital and technology. Anarchism has accepted such institutions as division of labor and domestication, prime movers of mass society — which it has also accepted.

Enter a new outlook. What is pre-eminently coming on goes by many names: anarcho-primitivism, neo-primitivism, green anarchy, civilization critique, among others. For short, let's just say we are primitivists. There are signs of this presence in many places; for example, in Brazil, where I joined hundreds of mostly young people at the Carnival *Revolução* in February 2008. Many told me that the primitivist orientation was *the* topic of conversation and that the old anarchism was visibly expiring. There is an anti-civilization network in Europe, including informal ties and fairly frequent gatherings in countries from Sweden to Spain and Turkey.

I remember my excitement upon discovering Situationist ideas: the emphasis on play and the gift, earthly pleasures not sacrificial self-denial. My favorite line from that current:

“Under the pavement, the beach.” But they were held back by the workers councils/productionist aspect of their orientation, which seemed at odds with the playful part. Now it is time to drop the latter, and fulfill the other, far more radical part.

A young woman in Croatia took it all further with her conclusion that primitivism is at base a spiritual movement. Is the quest for wholeness, immediacy, reconnection with the earth not spiritual? In November 2008 I was in India (Delhi, Jaipur), and could see that presenting an anti-industrial approach resonated among people of various spiritual backgrounds, including Gandhi-oriented folks.

Scattered primitivist voices and activities now exist in Russia, China, and the Philippines, and doubtless elsewhere. This may not yet constitute a movement surging below the surface, but reality is pushing in this direction, as I see it. It’s not only a logical development, but one aimed at the heart of the reigning denial, and long overdue.

This nascent primitivist movement should come as no surprise given the darkening crisis we see, involving every sphere of life. It is ranged against industrialism and the high-tech promises, which have only deepened the crisis. War on the natural world and an ever more arid, desolate, meaningless technoculture are blatant facts. The continued march of the Machine is not the answer but, profoundly, the problem. Traditional, leftist anarchism wanted the factories to be self-managed by the workers. We want a world without factories. Could it be clearer, for example, that global over-heating is a function of industrialization? Both began 200 years ago, and each step toward greater industrialization has been a step toward greater global overheating.

The primitivist perspective draws on indigenous, pre-domestication wisdom, tries to learn from the million years of human existence prior to/outside civilization. Gatherer-hunter life, also known as band society, was the original and only anarchy: face-to-face community in which people took

responsibility for themselves and each other. We want some version of this, a radically decentralized lifeworld, not the globalizing, standardizing reality of mass society, in which all the shiny technology rests on the drudgery of millions and the systematic killing of the earth.

Some are horrified by such new notions. Noam Chomsky, who manages to still believe all the lies of Progress, calls us “genocidists.” As if the continued proliferation of the modern techno-world isn’t genocidal already!

I see a growing interest in challenging this death march we are on. After all, where has Enlightenment or modernity made good on its claims of betterment? Reality is steadily impoverished in every way. The now almost daily school/mall/workplace massacres speak as loudly as the eco-disaster also unfolding around the globe. The Left has tried to block a sorely-needed deepening of public discourse, to include questioning the real depth of the frightening developments we face. The Left needs to go so that radical, inspiring visions can come forth and be shared.

An increasingly technified world where all is at risk is only inevitable if we continue to accept it as such. The dynamics of all this rest on primary institutions that must be challenged. We are seeing the beginnings of this challenge now, past the false claims of technology, capital, and the culture of postmodern cynicism — and past the corpse of the Left, and its extremely limited horizons.