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Why Primitivism?

John Zerzan

2002

Debord biographer Anselm Giap¹ referred to the puzzle of the present, “where the results of human activity are so antagonistic to humanity itself” recalling a question posed nearly 50 years ago by Joseph Wood Krutch: “What has become of that opportunity to become more fully human that the ‘control of nature’ was to provide?”²

The general crisis is rapidly deepening in every sphere of life. On the biospheric level, this reality is so well-known that it could be termed banal, if it weren’t so horrifying. Increasing rates of species extinctions, proliferating dead zones in the world’s oceans, ozone holes, disappearing rainforests, global warming, the pervasive poisoning of air, water, and soil, to name a few realities.

A grisly link to the social world is widespread pharmaceutical contamination of watersheds.³ In this case, destruction of the natural world is driven by massive alienation, masked by

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¹ Anselm Giap, *Guy Debord* (Berkeley, 1999), p. 3.

² Joseph Wood Krutch, *Human Nature and the Human Condition* (New York, 1959), p. 192.

³ J. Raloff, “More Waters Test Positive for Drugs,” *Science News* 157 (April 1, 2000).

drugs. In the U.S., life-threatening obesity is sharply rising, and tens of millions suffer from serious depression and/or anxiety.⁴ There are frequent eruptions of multiple homicides in homes, schools, and workplaces, while the suicide rate among young people has tripled in recent decades.⁵ Fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and other “mystery”/psychosomatic illnesses have multiplied, vying with the emergence of new diseases with known physiological origins: Ebola, Lassa fever, AIDS, Legionnaires’ disease. The illusion of technological mastery is mocked by the antibiotic-resistant return of TB and malaria, not to mention outbreaks of E coli, mad cow disease, West Nile virus, etc. Even a cursory survey of contemporary psychic immiseration would require many pages. Barely suppressed anger, a sense of emptiness, corrosion of belief in institutions across the board, high stress levels, all contribute to what Kornoouh has called “the growing fracture of the social bond.”⁶

Today’s reality keeps underlining the inadequacy of current theory and its overall retreat from any redemptive project. It seems undeniable that’s what’s left of life on earth is being taken from us. Where is the depth of analysis and vision to match the extremity of the human condition and the fragility of our planet’s future? Are we simply only with a totalizing current of degradation and loss?

The crisis is diffuse, but at the same time it is starkly visible on every level. One comes to agree with Ulrich Beck that “people have begun to question modernity...its premises have begun to wobble. Many people are deeply upset over the

⁴ The dramatic upsurge in health-threatening obesity has occasioned many articles, but exact figures are elusive at this time. 27% of adult Americans suffer depression or anxiety disorders. See “Recognizing the Anxious Face of Depression,” G.S. Malhi et al, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* 190, June 2002.

⁵ S.K. Goldsmith, T.C. Pellner, A.M. Kleinman, W.E. Bunney, eds., *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative* (Washington, D.C., 2002)

⁶ Claude Kornoouh, “On Interculturalism and Multiculturalism,” *TE-LOS* 110 (Winter 1998), p. 133.

house-of-cards character of superindustrialism.⁷ Agnes Heller observed that our condition becomes less stable and more chaos-prone the further we move away from nature, contrary to the dominant ideology of progress and development.⁸ With disenchantment comes a growing sense that something different is urgently needed.

For a new orientation the challenge is at a depth that theorists have almost entirely avoided. To go beyond the prospectless malaise, the collapse of social confidence so devastatingly expressed in *Les Particules élémentaires* (Michel Houlebecq's end-of-the-millennium novel),⁹ the analytical perspective simply must shift in a basic way. This consists, for openers, in refusing Foucault's conclusion that human capacities and relations are inescapably technologized.¹⁰

As Eric Vogelin put it, "The death of the spirit is the price of progress."¹¹ But if the progress of nihilism is identical to the nihilism of progress, whence comes the rupture, the caesura? How to pose a radical break from the totality of progress, technology, modernity?

A quick scan of recent academic fads shows precisely where such a perspective has not been found. Frederic Jameson's apt formulation introduces the subject for us: "Postmodernism is

⁷ Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment: Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1995), p. 37.

⁸ Agnes Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 60.

⁹ Michel Houlebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris, 1998). More prosaically, Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, 2000) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux: propos pour servir la résistance contre l'invasion néolibérale* (Paris, 1998), especially p. 97, characterize modern society along these lines.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), pp. 47–48.

¹¹ Eric Vogelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Vogelin*, vol. 5, *Modernity Without Restraint* (Columbia, MO, 2000), p.105.

what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”¹²

Postmodernism is the mirror of an ethos of defeat and reaction, a failure of will and intellect that has accommodated to new extremities of estrangement and destructiveness.¹³ For the postmodernists, almost nothing can be opposed. Reality, after all, is so messy, shifting, complex, indeterminate; and oppositions are, of course, just so many false binarisms. Vacuous jargon and endless side-stepping transcend passé dualisms. Daniel White, for example, prescribed “a postmodern-ecological rubric that steps past the traditional either-or of the Oppressor and Oppressed...”¹⁴

In the consumerist realm of freedom, “this complex node, where technologies are diffused, where technologies are chosen,” according to Mike Michael,¹⁵ who can say if anything is at all amiss? Iain Chambers is an eloquent voice of postmodern abjectness, wondering whether alienation is not simply an eternal given: “What if alienation is a terrestrial constraint destined to frustrate the ‘progress’ introjected in all teleologies?...Perhaps there is no separate, autonomous alternative to the capitalist structuring of the present-day world. Modernity, the westernization of the world, globalization, are the la-

¹² Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC, 1991), p. ix.

¹³ John Zerzan, “The Catastrophe of Postmodernism,” *Future Primitive* (New York, 1994).

¹⁴ Daniel R. White, *Postmodern Ecology* (Albany, 1998), p. 198. Bourdieu referred to “the futility of the strident calls of ‘postmodern’ philosophers for the ‘suppression of dualism.’ These dualisms deeply rooted in things (structures) and in bodies, do not spring from a simple effect of verbal naming and cannot be abolished by an act of performative magic ...” — Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, 2001), p. 103.

¹⁵ Mike Michael, *Reconnecting Culture, Technology and Nature* (London, 2000), p. 8. The title itself is testimony to the surrender to domination.

foundation of domestication and continues to drive the technological imperative forward.

The challenge is to disprove George Grant's thesis that we live in "a world where only catastrophe can slow the unfolding of the potentialities of technique,"⁴⁰ and to actualize Claude Kornoouh's judgment that revolution can only be redefined against progress.⁴¹

bels of an economic, political and cultural order that is seemingly installed for the foreseeable future."¹⁶

The fixation on surface (depth is an illusion; so are presence and immediacy), the ban on unifying narratives and inquiry into origins, indifference to method and evidence, emphasis on effects and novelty, all find their expression in postmodern culture at large. These attitudes and practices spread everywhere, along with the technology it embraces without reservation. At the same time, though, there are signs that these trivializing and derivative recipes for "thought" may be losing their appeal.¹⁷ An antidote to postmodern surrender has been made available, largely through what is known as the anti-globalization movement.

Jean-François Lyotard, who once thought that technologized existence offered options, has begun to write about the sinister development of a neo-totalitarian, instrumentalist imprisonment. In earlier essays he pointed to a loss of affect as part of the postmodern condition. More recently he has attributed that loss to techno-scientific hegemony. Crippled individuals are only part of the picture, as Lyotard portrays social effects of what can only be called instrumental reason, in pathological ascendance. And contra Habermas, this domination by instrumental reason is in no way challenged by "communicative action."¹⁸ Referring to global urban development, Lyotard stated,

⁴⁰ George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto, 1969), p. 142. Of course, the situation grows more and more grave, with sudden, dire changes very possible. M. Sheffer, et. al., "Catastrophic Shifts in Ecosystems," *Nature* (11 October 2001); M. Manion and W.M. Evan on the growing likelihood of disasters, "Technological Catastrophes: their causes and preventions," *Technology in Society* 24 (2002), pp. 207–224.

⁴¹ Claude Kornoouh, "Technique et Destin," *Krisis* 34 (Fall, 2000).

¹⁶ Iain Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* (London, 2002), pp. 122, 41.

¹⁷ Recent titles in various fields indicate a shift. For example, *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy After Postmodernity*, eds. Martin Beck Matustic and William L. McBride (Evanston, IL, 2002) and *Family Therapy beyond Postmodernism* by Carmel Flaskas (New York, 2002). *After Poststructuralism: Writing the Intellectual History of Theory*, eds. Tilottama Rajan and Michael J. Driscoll (Toronto, 2002) is haunted by themes of origins and the primitive.

¹⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, "Domus and the Megalopolis" [which could very legitimately have been called, in anti-postmodernist fashion, "From Domus to the Megalopolis"] in *The Inhuman: Reflections of Time* (Stanford, 1991), p. 200.

"We inhabit the megalopolis only to the extent that we declare it uninhabitable. Otherwise, we are just lodged there." Also, "with the megalopolis, what is called the West realizes and diffuses its nihilism. It is called development."¹⁹

In other words, there may be a way out of the postmodern cul-de-sac, at least for some. Those still contained by the Left have a much different legacy of failure to jettison — one that obviously transcends the "merely" cultural. Discredited and dying as an actual alternative, this perspective surely also needs to go.

Hardt and Negri's *Empire*²⁰ will serve as a classic artifact of leftism, a compendium of the worn-out and left-over. These self-described communist militants have no notion whatsoever of the enveloping crisis. Thus they continue to seek "alternatives within modernity." They locate the force behind their communist revolution in "the new productive practices and the concentration of productive labor on the plastic and fluid terrain of the new communicative, biological, and mechanical technologies."²¹ The leftist analysis valiantly upholds the heart of productionist marxism, in the face of ever-advancing, standardizing, destructive technique. Small wonder Hardt and Negri fail to consider the pulverization of indigenous cultures and the natural world, or the steady worldwide movement toward complete dehumanization.

Claude Kornoouh considers monstrous "the idea that progress consists in the total control of the genetic stock of all living beings." For him, this would amount to an unfreedom "that even the bloodiest totalitarianism of the 20th century was not able to accomplish."²² Hardt and Negri would not

¹⁹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 200, and Postmodern Fables (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 23.

²⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

²¹ Hardt and Negri, p. 218.

²² Claude Kornoouh, "Heidegger on History and Politics as Events," *TELOS* 120 (Summer 2001), p. 126.

see this trajectory for what it really is: a transformation that inevitably brought all-enveloping destruction, that was in no way necessary. Significantly, the worldwide archaeological record demonstrates that many human groups tried agriculture and/or pastoralism and later gave them up, falling back on more reliable foraging and hunting strategies. Others refused for generations to adopt the domestication practices of close neighbors.

It is here that a primitivist alternative has begun to emerge, in theory and in practice.³⁷ To the question of technology must be added that of civilization itself. Ever-growing documentation of human prehistory as a very long period of largely non-alienated human life stands in stark contrast to the increasingly stark failures of untenable modernity.

In the context of his discussion of the limitations of Habermas, Joel Whitebook wrote, "It may be that the scope of and depth of the social and ecological crisis are so great that nothing short of an epochal transformation of world views will be commensurate with them."³⁸ Since that time, Castoriadis concluded that a radical transformation will "have to launch an attack on the division of labor in its hitherto known forms."³⁹ Division of labor, slowly emerging through prehistory, was the

³⁷ This tendency within an increasingly anarchist-oriented anti-globalization movement is in the ascendant in the U.S. Among a growing number of periodicals are *Anarchy*, *Disorderly Conduct*, *The Final Days*, *Green Anarchy*, *Green Journal*, and *Species Traitor*. Texts include Chellis Glendinning, *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization* (Boston, 1994); Derrick Jensen, *Culture of Make Believe* (New York, 2002); Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael* (New York, 1995); John Zerzan, *Running On Emptiness: the Pathology of Civilization* (Los Angeles, 2002).

³⁸ Joel Whitebook, "The Problem of Nature in Habermas," *TELOS* 40 (Summer, 1979), p. 69.

³⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 257. Also, Keekok Lee, "To De-Industrialize — Is It So Irrational?" in *The Politics of Nature*, eds. Andrew Dobson and Paul Lucardie (London, 1993).

tural lifeway, most people had ample free time, considerable gender autonomy or equality, an ethos of egalitarianism and sharing, and no organized violence.

A (misleadingly-named) “Man the Hunter” conference at the University of Chicago in 1966 launched the reversal of the Hobbesian view, which for centuries had provided ready justification for all the repressive institutions of a complex, imperializing Western culture. Supporting evidence for the new paradigm has come forth from archaeologists and anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Richard B. Lee, Adrienne Zihlman, and many others;³⁵ these studies are widely available, and now form the theoretical basis for everything from undergraduate courses to field research.

Archaeologists continue to uncover examples of how our Paleolithic forbears led mainly peaceful, egalitarian, and healthy lives for about two million years. The use of fire to cook tuberous vegetables as early as 1.9 million years ago, and long distance sea travel 800,000 years ago, are two findings among many that testify to an intelligence equal to our own.³⁶

Genetic engineering and imminent human cloning are just the most current manifestations of a dynamic of control and domination of nature that humans set in motion 10,000 years ago, when our ancestors began to domesticate animals and plants. In the 400 generations of human existence since then, all of natural life has been penetrated and colonized at the deepest levels, paralleling the controls that have been ever more thoroughly engineered at the social level. Now we can

³⁵ Important texts include Eleanor Leacock and Richard B. Lee, *Politics and History in Band Societies* (New York, 1982); Richard B. Lee and Richard Daly, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* (Cambridge, 1999); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972); Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York, 1968); Adrienne Zihlman, et.al., *The Evolving Female* (Princeton, 1997).

³⁶ M.J. Morwood, et. al., “Fission-track ages of stone tools and fossils on the east Indonesian island of Flores,” *Nature* (12 March 1998), for example.

shrink from such control, since they do not question any of its premises, dynamics, or preconditions.

It is no small irony that the militants of *Empire* stand exposed for the incomprehension of the trajectory of modernity by one of their opposite number, Oswald Spengler. As nationalist and reactionary that Spengler was, *The Decline of the West* is the great masterwork of world history, and his grasp of Western civilization’s inner logic is uncanny in its prescience.

Especially relevant here are Spengler’s judgments, so many decades ago, concerning technological development and its social, cultural, and environmental impacts. He saw that the dynamic, promethean (“Faustian”) nature of global civilization becomes fully realized as self-destructive mass society and equally calamitous modern technology. The subjugation of nature leads ineluctably to its destruction, and to the destruction of civilization. “An artificial world is permeating and poisoning the natural. The Civilization itself has become a machine that does, or tries to do everything in mechanical terms.”²³ Civilized man is a “petty creator against Nature.” “...This revolutionary in the world of life...has become the slave of his creature. The Culture, the aggregate of artificial, personal, self-made life-forms, develops into a close-barred cage ... ”²⁴

Whereas Marx viewed industrial civilization as both reason incarnate and a permanent achievement, Spengler saw it as ultimately incompatible with its physical environment, and therefore suicidally transitory. “Higher Man is a tragedy. With his graves he leaves behind the earth a battlefield and a wasteland. He has drawn plant and animal, the sea and mountain into his decline. He has painted the face of the world with blood, deformed and mutilated it.”²⁵ Spengler understood that

²³ Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics* (Munich, 1931), p. 94.

²⁴ Spengler, *Man and Technics*, p. 69

²⁵ Spengler, *Früzeit der Weltgeschichte*, #20, p. 9. Quoted in John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline* (Baton Rouge, 2001), p. 224.

"the history of this technics is fast drawing to its inevitable close."²⁶

Theodor Adorno seemed to concur with elements of Spengler's thinking: "What can oppose the decline of the west is not a resurrected culture but the utopia that is silently contained in the image of its decline."²⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*²⁸ has a critique of civilization at its core, with its focal image of Odysseus forcibly repressing the Sirens' song of eros. *Dialectic*'s central thesis is that "the history of civilization is... The history of renunciation."²⁹ As Albrecht Wellmer summed it up, "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the theory of an irredeemably darkened modernity."³⁰ This perspective, now continually augmented by confirming data, tends to render irrelevant both sources of theory and the logic of progress. If there is no escape from a condition we can understand all too well, what more is there to say?

Herbert Marcuse tried to lay out an escape route in *Eros and Civilization*,³¹ by attempting to uncouple civilization from modernity. To preserve the "gains" of modernity, the solution is a "non-repressive" civilization. Marcuse would dispense with "surplus repression," implying that repression itself is indispensable. Since modernity depends on production, itself a repressive institution, redefining work as free play can salvage both modernity and civilization. I find this an implausible, even desperate defense of civilization. Marcuse fails to refute Freud's view that civilization cannot be reformed.

²⁶ Spengler, *Man and Technics*, p. 103.

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (London, 1967), p. 72.

²⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1947).

²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 55.

³⁰ Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: the Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 255.

³¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston, 1955).

Freud argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that non-repressive civilization is impossible, because the foundation of civilization is a forcible ban on instinctual freedom and eros. To introduce work and culture, the ban must be permanently imposed. Since this repression and its constant maintenance are essential to civilization, universal civilization brings universal neurosis.³² Durkheim had already noted that as humankind "advances" with civilization and the division of labor, "the general happiness of society is decreasing."³³

As a good bourgeois, Freud justified civilization on the grounds that work and culture are necessary and that civilization enables humans to survive on a hostile planet. "The principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d'être*, is to defend us against nature." And further, "But how ungrateful, how short-sighted after all to strive for the abolition of civilization! What would then remain would be a state of nature, and that would be far harder to bear."³⁴

Possibly civilization's most fundamental ideological underpinning is Hobbes' characterization of the pre-civilized state of nature as "nasty, brutish, and short." Freud subscribed to this view, of course, as did Adorno and Horkheimer.

Since the mid-1960s there has been a paradigm shift in how anthropologists understand prehistory, with profound implications for theory. Based on a solid body of archaeological and ethnographic research, mainstream anthropology has abandoned the Hobbesian hypothesis. Life before or outside civilization is now defined more specifically as social existence prior to domestication of animals and plants. Mounting evidence demonstrates that before the Neolithic shift from a foraging or gatherer-hunter mode of existence to an agricul-

³² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York, 1961).

³³ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York, 1933), p. 249.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion," *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (London, 1957), p. 15.