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Secular Antinomian Anabaptist Neo-Luddism

What can anarchists and anarcho-primitivists
learn from Old Order religious groups about living
beyond technology?

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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“By banning the telephone from the home, Old Order Amish...try to maintain the primacy of communication within the context of community.”

–D.Z. Umble

“Church splits are bad, some things are worse, and one of them is to keep on compromising with something we know is sinful.”

–Anon., Separated Unto Christ (Old Order Mennonite tract, circa 1995)

The Unabomber wanted to return to about 1880; at the other extreme, the Green Nihilists demand the deep Paleolithic via the total destruction of modern Civilization. The term anarcho-primitivist can cover a whole spectrum of variations on theme of reversion, of “going back” to some “earlier” human condition.

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But today's anarcho-primitivists are not the only critics of modern technology and alienation to emerge from the traditional left or "Movement of the Social." Charles Fourier may have been the first radical to out-do Rousseau by attacking the totality of Civilization and praising "savages and Barbarians" as far happier than modern humanity. But he proposed moving forward to Utopia rather than back to Tahiti (always the French archetype of primitive paradise—hence, Gauguin's later expatriation).

Of course, a classical anarchist critique of Civilization and specifically of technology can already be gleaned from William Morris and Kropotkin, with precursors among the Romantics. (See, for instance, Byron's poem in defense of the machine-smashers, with its incendiary refrain: "No King but King Ludd!" Blake's "satanic mills" were also part of the tradition.) One of the original Ludd Letters defined the Luddite movement as resistance to any technology "hurtful to the commonalty."

By this definition, anarcho-primitives might be defined as neo-luddites. Some draw the line at steam, others at flintknapping, but the principle is the same. Not to make light of the differences—but if I have to wait for the overthrow of language, music, and even a sense of humor before the gates of paradise crack open even a tiny slit, then I confess despair.

The Nihilists among us appear to believe that no compromise, no gradual approach (e.g., through alternative technology) can be admitted. Destruction, yes. But no "building the kernel of the new society within the shell of the old." All Now or Nothing Never. Therefore, they see no purpose in any piecemeal reversionism of a constructive nature. And consequently, it seems, they see no reason to "deny" themselves the use of cars and computers.

I find this puzzling because I find cars and computers to be extremely unpleasurable devices. I'd love to be able to live without them, and I've greatly enjoyed the few periods of my

life when I could (mostly in what we used to call the Third World.) Unfortunately, luddism is not a viable practice at the individual hermit level (or anyway, not for a klutz like the above signed). You need *communitas* (as that “Neolithic Conservative” Paul Goodman put it) in order to live luddism as a pleasure and not a form of self-denial like wearing a hair shirt.

It’s almost a Catch-22. You need luddism to make *communitas* and *communitas* to practice luddism.

Furthermore, most of us would starve to death without cars and computers and even cell phones. Capital creates needs; those needs become real. Most of us can live without a TV, but to live without telephones would require an organic local community organized voluntarily around luddite ideals.

Which brings us to the Anabaptists.

The original Anabaptists have been admired by many revolutionaries from Engels to Landauer. The “Luther Blisset” trio of Bologna Neo-Situationists who wrote the highly entertaining erudite pulp thriller *Q*, depict the old Anabaptists as out-and-out antinomian anarchists. (Here, they were possibly influenced by R. Vaneigem’s praise of the Brethren of the Free Spirit.) Relevant to the present discussion, however, is the Anabaptist critique of technology, which only developed at a later period.

The revolutionary Anabaptists were ruthlessly suppressed by both 16th century Protestant and Catholic powers. But quietist/pacifist Anabaptism survived by fleeing to the New World. In Europe, almost no trace remains, but here in North America, we have the Old Order Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, Schwenkfeldians, and even a few Old Order Quakers, all still living in intentional communities and practicing luddism, functioning more or less happily without telephones, computers, cars, or even electricity.

But are they in any sense anarchists? They may be quite authoritarian/patriarchal on one level, but they also retain interesting traces of their anti-authoritarian heritage. For instance,

their bishops and ministers are chosen by lot. They refuse all cooperation with governments, will not serve in armies, or run for office; and they practice mutual aid. The Hutterites live as “Bible communists;” the Amish live in separate households; but all are intensely social. The Bruderhof, an offshoot of the Hutterites, are proud of their anarcho-socialist forebears and almost worship the German anarchist, Gustav Landauer, as a saint.

The only real source of power in the Old Order sects is the *Bann*, whereby members of the autonomous congregation can excommunicate and “shun”—but only by unanimous consent—any member who refuses to accept the (unwritten) Ordinances on technology. Uncountable splits have resulted from use of the *Bann*, with subsects who use hook-and-eye fasteners and not buttons or zippers, and other subsects who accept cars but only if painted entirely black including the bumpers. The variations are fascinating and *not trivial* (although sometimes amusing). Dissidents are free to leave. Around age 20 the youth are invited to join the church, which of course can only be joined by *adult* baptism; if they decide not to join, their decision is regretted but they are not shunned. Physical coercion in any case is forbidden by pacifist ideals.

The Old Orders emphasize farming because, in their view, Nature is close to God. From the anarcho-primitive perspective, this farming involves a level of “domestication” unacceptable to extremists. But we should remember that they are actually practicing a form of reversion, and we are not. How do they do it?

Some “plain people” share a single phone or a single car among five or six adjacent farms. Instead of electricity, they’ll use compressed air and propane. Others allow some electricity if it’s generated off-grid. One might call this an impure or empirical luddism.

In every decision the ideal is to maintain communities. Horses allow organic community. The horse is the key to Old

The last time something like anarcho-communitarianism was tried on a wider scale, in the 1960s, it ended in “failure.” But in a world where Capital can recuperate almost everything, perhaps failure is our last possible Outside. In any case, it was an adventure. Success or failure remains unforeseeable—but adventure is something that can be willed.

Order tech. As one bishop put it, “If you can pull it with a horse, you can have it.” But the Internet, they feel, threatens community with utter destruction. The sects that maintain a hard line on tech make hard use of the *Bann*. Around 1907, the main Amish body in Lancaster, Pennsylvania lost a quarter of its members over the telephone question, using the Bann with strict revolutionary logic to preserve the core group. The Old Order Brethren divided over telephones in 1905. They certainly remind one of anarchists or Surrealists or Situationists in their tendency to wrangle and split.

Could there exist such a thing as *secular anabaptism*—or is the fanaticism of religion a prerequisite for carrying on a revolution for 400 years without flinching? In any case, their persistence and existence prove that luddite life is possible, given some compromises, even in the (post)modern world.

In the 1990s, a brief secular luddite movement derived some inspiration and held a series of conferences in contact with some of the plain people. Kirkpatrick Sale published *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age*. But when I wrote to him two years ago he admitted that he knew of not one secular luddite community anywhere in the world.

Why can’t anarchists live without electricity? Are we finally too implicated in the Progressism and technophilia of most of our historical movement? How many anarcho-primitivists does it take to unscrew a light bulb?

To put the question another way: why are we denying ourselves the *pleasure of reversion*?

The Amish may be dour, but they have produced a sort of zen-shaker life-texture that possesses spontaneous good taste—always a sign of pleasure. Some Old Order sects allow tobacco and wine and “bed bundling” among courting couples—and their various “bees” provide excuses for feasts and “visiting.” Their art has powerful roots in the creative mysticism of such Pennsylvania Rosicrucian ancestors as Johannes Kelpius or

the visionaries of Ephrata. Romanticism and nature mysticism come naturally to them (and the Bruderhof read Novalis and Goethe).

But the key to Amish autonomy is economic self-sufficiency. They buy no insurance and accept no government handouts. Farming and crafts provide what they need. In Italy, anarchism almost provides an alternate economy in the wide network of squats, social centers, and farms it controls. But in the USA now, anarchism has no economic institutions capable of providing livelihoods for its adherents. No food or craft coops, no farms or CSAs—Community Supported Agriculture.

The very use of technopathocracy's hi-tech mechanisms such as cars and computers seems to militate against the feasibility of realizing other desires, as if the *apparatus* itself were designed to suppress them. (Which it is.)

The Amish model involves a retreat from "the World" rather than the revolutionary confrontation proposed by militant 16th century Anabaptism—or by anarchism. But nowadays retreat makes good sense from a tactical point of view in light of the Empire's overwhelming force for oppression on every level of "civilized" life. In fact, this retreat has already occurred. (American anarchism is not presently engaged in revolution, despite its occasional rhetoric and perennial optimism.) But why shouldn't we make it a *tactical retreat*?

Can we imagine an antinomian anabaptism or even a secular neo-luddism capable of organizing a tentative and impure but still radical reversion on the microscale of intentional community? A small but pleasurable (also risky) retreat from the world of Too Late Capitalism?

The Old Orders don't seem to theorize. Their Ordinances are fluid because unwritten. Writing is distrusted because it stops the flow and threatens the organicity of tradition. In fact, all their theory work tends to be done in community, not by individual leaders, and certainly not by reading texts (other than scripture of course, which itself possesses a certain fluidity in

exegesis). In a sort of Hegelian way, theory is both *suppressed* in its alienating mode as "dead letter" and *realized* at once in its creative mode as living community.

Precisely this "overcoming" marks the genetic link between Anabaptism and revolutionary anarchism and communism—a shared ancestry which fascinated historians like Norman Cohn and E.P. Thompson. Anabaptists and related sects like the Old Order Quakers have persisted where communism and anarchism have apparently failed—but only because they turned away from the World as "saving remnant" or "gathered churches," closed themselves off from oppression and alienation rather than confronting it with the militancy of the early Anabaptists like Thomas Munzer. (The early Quakers also had their ranters and militants like James Nayler. Later, they escaped the extermination of the radical sects in England by embracing pacifism and buying Pennsylvania.)

Does anarcho-primitivism have anything to learn from these sects? For us, it may seem that revolution is necessary strategically but impossible tactically—precisely the situation facing 16th century Anabaptism and the anti-authoritarian antinomian extreme "left" of the Reformation. The response was to drop out and retreat as far from the "Antichrist" as possible into small utopian communities. "Revolution" was turned inward, via the Bann and the splits, rather than outward into missionary work or confrontational militancy. And, since some of these communities have lasted for centuries, resisted compulsory education, conscription, and even electricity, an empirical argument can be made for the efficacy of those tactics.

Anarchist utopianism has a noble history in America. It has always been part of our strategic deployment. If the Old Order sects have no other lesson for us, at least they demonstrate that the vortex of the apparatus can be resisted by living without it, i.e., outside it—to the extent really possible.