A Black Critique of Civilization

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(The following piece is an unfinished draft that will never be finished due to the death of the author. Some points would have originally been further worked out.)

Why can we imagine the end of the world but not the end of all authority?

We are so imprisoned by the logic of civilization in our everyday lives that we can no longer imagine a free and fulfilling life, liberated of all constraints, all oppression, all mechanisms of control and domination. Even the fiercest advocates of anarchism cannot imagine anarchy. They subjugate themselves to the logic of so-called "progress," which is really only progress for the most privileged. They don't dream of an end of all chains, because some chains aren't worth breaking if they continue to secure modern conveniences (at others' expense).

If someone had thrown a critique of the modern way of life at my head a decade ago, I would have reacted with swift anger. You can't be serious? What is the alternative? Should we crawl back into the caves? I would surely have reacted just like al-

most everyone today. How could it be otherwise? I had a grueling but quite well-paid job in the tech industry. My employer put a car at my disposal for any use, my smartphone was replaced with a new model ever year, my family was doing well. We may not have been able to afford absolutely everything that we needed (what advertising wanted to make us believe we needed), but we never had to worry about whether the next rent bill for the house would be paid or whether there would be enough food on the table. Give up all of that?

Life was certainly not perfect, definitely not when you're a black family living and working in white surroundings. But in my narrow horizon I only saw the good in life, the modern conveniences. A life without this contemporary civilization? For me that meant an end of progress. A world in which only the strongest survived, while the sick and weak are abandoned to die. Agony and death. The end. In my naivete and indoctrination through school, advertising, and everything around me, I connected this civilization with happiness on Earth. I had no sense what really made up this civilization. Endless oppression of the poor by the rich, slavery and colonialism continued by digital and technological colonialism, rapidly increasing destruction and plundering of Mother Earth and the exploitation of labor for the sake of progress, wars for resources, for power, for beliefs, surveillance and control of the population at any price necessary to maintain the power of few privileged people at the top of the hierarchical chain.

All of that and much more is the true nature of civilization. That is the history of the last few thousand years, a tiny drop on the hot stone of human history. It required a stroke of fate for me to first open my eyes to the dark side of modernity. A side that should be visible to everyone, but which we push to the back of our minds because this modernity blinds us with its wonders while its benefits create contentment.

It was almost nine years ago that my entire life turned upside down. Through my work I came into contact everyday with the

Civilization and (industrial) technology are barriers preventing true human progress. If we want to overcome authority once and for all, we cannot avoid deconstructing civilization in order to build a free, anarchist world which enables a good life for every human.

Critique and debate around civilization is today occupied by white and (non-black) Indigenous anarchists, while the civilization critique of black anarchists is a marginal phenomenon and practically invisible. This is in part nourished by the fact that for some white anarchists it can be a convenient way to cover up their own racism and ableism. As long as the present climate collapse accelerates, right-wingers will probably also begin to take up rhetoric critical of technology. But it should be made clear that anti-civilized and post-civilized ideas are by their very nature incompatible with right-wing confusions and fit exclusively within an anarchistic framework in which all people are taken into account. I once read in a (white) text about a so-called right-wing anti-civilization. How could something like that even be possible? Fascism is one of the highest forms of civilization. The desire of some fascists to "go back" is a deeply civilized position, because their wish does not mean the anarchy of a pre-civilized world but civilizations like the Roman Empire.

The five years that my doctors gave me have long gone. I don't know when fate will overtake me, but I sincerely wish for my brothers and sisters to break loose from all massa's chains, even if I will probably no longer be able to witness it myself. I only know that it requires a deconstruction of civilization to be free of the chains and to once again enjoy life to the fullest and to make the earth livable again for our children and our children's children.

Find those who have the burning fire for a wilder and more just world.

At this point let me at least make one thing clear. A world without mass industry and civilization would not make impossible products that are needed for a good and fulfilling life for all people. Take for example accessibility devices for disabled people like wheelchairs and visual aids. These are not complex constructions, not technologies. These are tools which existed long before the Industrial Revolution. There is no reason to assume that such accessibility devices would suddenly cease to exist. The knowledge of the last thousands of years will not easily be lost and even if there are tools which have arisen from the course of civilization's history, there are also products which could continue to exist in a post-civilized world. There is no complex, exploitative industry required for their manufacture, and the ecological impact is minimal, while the lives of people with disabilities are effectively improved.

Other products could also continue to exist in a post-civilized, anti-industrial world. However to be able to characterize this this world as anarchistic and anti-colonial it is necessary for most technology to cease to exist. What technologies will be possible will only be shown afterwards. People must ask themselves the question of what they can create without reproducing exploitation, colonialism, ecocide, and authority. The Fifth Estate expressed it as follows: "Reduced to its most basic elements, discussions about the future sensibly should be predicated on what we desire socially and from that determine what technology is possible. All of us desire central heating, flush toilets, and electric lighting, but not at the expense of our humanity. Maybe they are all possible together, but maybe not." A post-civilized world thus has no predetermined vision of a possible future. It could be primitive, but it doesn't necessarily have to be. The anarchist journal "AJODA" imagines a world that is, "'radically cooperative & communitarian, ecological and feminist, spontaneous and wild," and this is possibly what comes closest to a description.

poisonous and hazardous materials which power industry and the devices it produces. I was always conscious of the danger I was exposing myself to but someone had to do this job, or did they? Then I was met by terrible fate: through a combination of mishaps and technology failures I lost my eyesight and my left hand. Thousands of questions shot through my head. How do I take care of my family? What happens to the house? How much will my life change? A little bit later the doctors did me one better with a cancer diagnosis. Five years to live. Then, at the latest, modern life would catch up to me.

It was at this time that I, initially involuntarily, turned to anarchism. Despite my infatuation with the wonders of technology, the new screen reader was strange for me. I had always enjoyed the comfort offered by the smartphone, the PC, the washing machine, but the thought that a machine would noticeably determine a part of my life alienated me. It was once again possible for me to read, but it was not me that was reading. My sudden illness strengthened the bonds of family, and every day my daughter read to me from her small library. It still wasn't me that was reading, but it was no machine. The books that she read to me were all things I would have never picked up with my own hand: anarchist works. Anarchy… that's that rebellious phase for young people, the one they'll lay aside as soon as they grow up and start real life. I deeply regret not having listened to my daughter much sooner, because the more I listened, the more receptive I was to this "rebellious mental world." I started putting two and two together and recognizing the connections in this world. Why do some people have a full plate while others go hungry? Why is the world dying around us, though we become ever more progressive? Where does all the suffering on this planet come from? It is easy to blame capitalism for everything bad in this world, but that would generally be considered a reductive critique of capitalism. The suffering did not start a few hundred years ago. Capitalism only accelerated these processes to a never before

seen extent. Industry is today the greatest driver of suffering and that will not change whether industry is in capitalist or other hands. My stroke of fate also had a positive side. Not only did I forge a much deeper connection to my family, but also to the Earth. I recognize the suffering in this world, for which my own personal comfort is in part responsible. I may be blind but now I see clearer than ever before.

My understanding of the true nature of industry and civilization did not come instantly. It started, as with all anarchists, with an understanding of state and capital. But here is where most anarchists also stop. The critique and rejection of authority is partially widened to other areas like that of the patriarchy. But industry and above all that underlying authority of all authorities, civilization, remains largely untouched by anarchist analysis. I think this is in large part because the term "civilization" is poorly understood and falsely described as social-togetherness. If this is the case then consequently there has only been civilization throughout all of human history, since people have always lived together. Yet civilization can be given a particular date: the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution. Humans first started to erect civilization 10-12,000 years ago and laid aside their "uncivilized" lifeways bit by bit.

Civilization was and is not a specific event in history. It has continuously developed and it continues to do so today. From urbanization to governments, states, borders, social stratification, colonialism, expansionism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, police, military, surveillance, control, genocide, and ecocide… all of these are essential features emerging from civilization. A civilization is not shaped by social-togetherness but rather by the centralization of power in a few people. Why then is the authority of civilization not recognized and rejected by most anarchists, who allegedly are against all authority?

With that we finally come to the most important point. Most anarchists cannot imagine anarchy. They cannot imagine a life in which they must give up the greater part of their luxury goods. I consciously say luxury goods, because these are things which are not needed for a good and fulfilling life but are rather desired. I don't want to say that these products are irrelevant just because they aren't necessary. I am specifically interested in two points:

1. How are these products manufactured? What are the direct consequences for the environment and people?

2. What authority lives within these products themselves?

Many products, most of all technological devices, are based on exploitation. For the process of manufacturing, not only the Earth needs to be exploited (wherein its endless resources are stolen, usually accompanied by a massive destruction of the environment). People also need to be exploited (most of all people in the Global South, where the most important and plentiful resources are found). It is usually dangerous work that no one would take on voluntarily. If people were no longer compelled to go to work to survive, some (many) jobs would cease to exist. If you demand a particular luxury good, you will need to crawl into the mine yourself to gather and collect the necessary materials. Don't expect others to risk their lives and health for your comfort. It is a sign of the prevailing degree of naivete that we cannot imagine that a food forest could feed us, but that many still believe every imaginable technology will magically produce itself and rain down from heaven.

The underlying authority of technology is also something that we shouldn't ignore in an anarchist analysis. Many technologies are not just used for unbelievably authoritarian purposes (war, imperialism, population control), but were explicitly created for these. Of course you can say that these technologies just need to get into "good hands," but that reveals a further naivety. There will always be domineering people who want to dominate others, and if these technologies even exist they will continue to be used for terrible things. A tank can protect your community against a hostile group, but it can just as easily roll over you.