# Anarchism vs. Primitivism

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# 1. The Demonology of Primitivism

> "No one has ever been so witty as you are in trying to turn us into brutes: to read your book makes one long to go on all fours. Since, however, it is now some sixty years since I gave up the practice, I feel that it is unfortunately impossible for me to resume it: I leave this natural habit to those more fit for it than are you and I."
>
> —Voltaire, letter to Rousseau, August 30, 1755.

## The Demonology of Primitivism: Electricity, Language, and other Modern Evils

Gar Smith, editor of the Earth Island Institute journal, *The Edge*, and critic of modern technology, recently complained to journalists, "I have seen villages in Africa that had vibrant culture and great communities that were disrupted and destroyed by the introduction of electricity." He added: "I don't think a lot of electricity is a good thing. It is the fuel that powers a lot of multi-national imagery." When asked why lack of electricity—a hallmark of poverty—ought to be considered advantageous, Smith said, "The idea that people are poor doesn't mean that they are not living good lives." He added, "there is a lot of quality to be had in poverty."

John Zerzan, a leading modern primitivist, writes in a similar vein, but claims those living in societies before electricity enjoyed higher standards of mental well-being: "Being alive in nature, before our abstraction from it [through modern civilization], must have involved a perception and contact that we can scarcely comprehend from our levels of anguish and alienation. The communication with all of existence must have been an exquisite play of all the senses, reflecting the numberless, nameless varieties of pleasure and emotion once accessible within us." Zerzan, the Green Anarchy Collective, and other primitivists regularly reminisce over an ideal past where "the wheat and corn, pigs and horses were once freely dancing in the chaos of nature." In fact, through their activism primitivists hope to deliver society into this primal chaos, so that the "wheat and corn, pigs and horses"—and the rest of us, presumably—may freely dance once more.

On web sites like primitivism.com, primitivists tell us how the Internet should not exist. In printed magazines like *Green Anarchy*, they condemn printing presses and typesetting technology. And in events like the Green Anarchy Tour of 2001, they complain of the roads that enable them to travel, the electricity that powers the instruments of their tour's musical acts, and of the existence of the facilities that host their events. Primitivists enjoin their audience to live like early hominids, though they certainly don't lead by example.

When analyzing primitivist musings, two mysteries immediately confront the reader. The first: how can such ideas be seriously entertained by anyone? Electricity, advanced medical care, information technologies, artificial heating and cooling, water purification, and countless other modern innovations are regarded by primitivists as undesirable. One would think that the lifespan of such notions would be as short as that of a Palaeolithic tribesman's. Yet, primitive thinking is currently enjoying a kind of vogue among the radical left.

The second perturbation: how to begin to make sense of all the rubbish primitivists write? Some of their screeds, on the one hand, ape (no pun intended) the most obnoxious, opaque phraseology of post-modernism: "Symbolizing is linear, successive, substitutive," John Zerzan delicately informs us in *Running on Emptiness*. "It cannot be open to its whole object simultaneously." On the other hand, many primitive rants drop any pretense of sophistication and devolve (again, no pun intended) into infantile histrionics: "WHY SHOULD I TOLERATE THIS INSANITY?" a

writer at insurgentdesire.org.uk bloviates. "NED LUDD WAS RIGHT! The machine is the enemy. SMASH IT WITHOUT MERCY!"

Indeed, why should we tolerate this insanity? How can we understand some of the genuinely bizarre ideas that litter the pantheon of our primitive romantics? And how is that the primitivist cocktail of mysticism, pseudo-science, and wild speculation has serious adherents in the full light of the 21st century?

Unfortunately for anarchists, plunging into the primitivist miasma has become necessary. Over the past few decades, primitivists have successfully assimilated themselves into the anarchist movement. Within the U.S., their influence has grown so strong that anarchists can no longer afford to ignore it. The corporate media, in its infinite wisdom, has often decided to present primitivism as "the new anarchism," blissfully ignoring the classical strand of anarchist thought that agitates for worker and community control within a stateless society. Unfortunately, this generous free advertising ensures that many new members of the anarchist movement will arrive through primitivism's feral gates.

The primitivists' stated aim is to reorient anarchism towards the wholesale destruction of civilization and its attendant technologies. Their analysis asserts that civilization estranges humanity from its true, feral nature—a regrettable situation, they say, since humans, as the Steppenwolf song goes, are born to be wild. Like Christian evangelists, they maintain that modern living results in spiritual and emotional poverty—a kind of soullessness that Mammoth hunters did not experience, and often hint that pagan belief systems are superior to rational thought. Technology, too, is inherently oppressive, no matter who wields it or to what uses it is put. In addition, primitivists warn of the dangers of population growth while Zerzanites even claim language to be a type of alienation. (Such statements alienate us with their language, incidentally). Although classical anarchists like Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin spoke of eliminating the state by transferring ownership of the means of production into the public's hands, primitivists have a different agenda: they wish to destroy, not redistribute, industry and technology.

The problem of primitivism in the anarchist movement is new only in scope. There have always been those on the fringes of the left who have hoped to return society to some type of idyllic, Garden of Eden-like existence. The idea of a noble savage at peace with himself, the pristine wilderness, and his fellow humans before modern civilization is as old as the plays of John Dryden in the 17th century. Many before our modern primitive romantics have advocated bucking it all and getting back to nature. As the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould counsels in *The Mismeasure of Man*, "the same bad arguments recur every few years with a predictable and depressing regularity. No sooner do we debunk one version than the next chapter of the same bad text emerges to ephemeral prominence."

Today, for example, tomes like *Future Primitive* and primitive sounding-boards such as *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* (*A:AJODA*), *Green Anarchy*, and *Fifth Estate* abound. The Rainbow Gathering, nominally non-anarchist, attracts all manner of tree folk, Middle Earthers, permaculture fanatics, and mystics to its primitivist-type festivals. At few points since the 19th century, however, have "primitive man" fantasists attempted to identify with anarchism. Indeed, a prominent strain of utopian socialists—romantics wishing to escape the modern world through communal living—have been a fixture on the left since the early 1800s, tagging along on the margins of anti-capitalism much like the apocalyptic Christian cults that gather on society's fringe. Marx and Bakunin differentiated this type of utopian socialism from forward-thinking socialism, which values science and its benefits; indeed, Bakunin hoped for a revolution in which science

"would become the property of everybody." And although Marx, for example, recognized that hunter-gatherer clans did indeed practice a type of "primitive communism," neither he nor his anarchist opponents advocated turning back the clock to relive such times. Anarchists did not consider the living standards of the Neanderthal worthy of modern humans. The only ones who felt that people should live like primitives were those capitalists whose desire to keep business costs down resulted in primitive living conditions for their wage slaves.

Utopian, "get-back-to-nature" sects attracted anarchist criticism from the beginning. It was in response to such backwards-thinking romantics that Mikhail Bakunin affirmed in the late 1800s, "It is not in the past, nor even in the present that ye should seek the freedom of the masses. It is in the future." Anarcho-syndicalist veteran Sam Dolgoff, speaking of life at the Stelton Colony of New York in the 1930s, noted with disdain that it, "like other colonies, was infested by vegetarians, naturists, nudists, and other cultists, who sidetracked true anarchist goals." One resident "always went barefoot, ate raw food, mostly nuts and raisins, and refused to use a tractor, being opposed to machinery, and he didn't want to abuse horses, so he dug the earth himself." Such self-proclaimed anarchists were in reality "ox-cart anarchists," Dolgoff said, "who opposed organization and wanted to return to a simpler life." In an interview with Paul Avrich before his death, Dolgoff also grumbled, "I am sick and tired of these half-assed artists and poets who object to organization and want only to play with their belly buttons."

This has been a problem seemingly for as long as anarchism has existed. Writing nearly a century ago, Malatesta's comrade Luigi Fabbri noted in *Bourgeois Influences on Anarchism* that the anarchist movement has always been overrun with flakes, parasites, and outright crazies. He wrote that these "empty-headed and frivolous types… are not repelled by the absurd, but… on the contrary, engage in it. They are attracted to projects and ideas precisely *because* they are absurd; and so anarchism comes to be known precisely for the illogical character and ridiculousness which ignorance and bourgeois calumny have attributed to anarchist doctrines."

With the rise of the anti-corporate globalization movement in recent years, the primitivist problem has assumed a new urgency: Whereas in the past primitive thinkers were consigned to the margins of the movement by virtue of the absurdity of their ideas, a recent absence of lively, mass class struggle activism has allowed primitive thinkers to exert greater influence. The onus is on traditional anarchists to take the movement back, and force primitive thinkers to their previous place on the sidelines.

Not to be discounted, either, is the influence of the corporate media, which has taken primitivism and situated it front and center, presenting it to the public as the lifeblood of a 2lst-century anarchist resurgence. Primitivism, the corporate media tells us, is the "new" anarchism—and young adults, hungry for any ideas that point to a way out of the capitalist ghetto, sometimes believe it, and sign up. The popularity of the anti-corporate globalization movement holds much promise for anarchism; the media's attempts to associate it with primitive ideas, however, does not.

*Time* magazine, for example, ran two articles in 2001 on John Zerzan and the cult-like following he has attracted in his home town of Eugene, Oregon (among other places). And a few years prior, *Time* bestowed the title "king of the anarchists" upon primitivist/Unabomber Ted Kaczynski in one of the more than 30 articles they devoted to him. The December 13, 1999, issue of *Newsweek* featured a picture of anarcho-syndicalist Noam Chomsky with images of Zerzan and convicted murderer Kaczynski beside him; the publication associated all three as leading lights of modern anarchist thought. NPR, *60 Minutes*, and other news outlets have given air time to the

absurd proclamations of John Zerzan even as the unofficial media ban of Noam Chomsky and other more capable analysts continues. Again, as Fabbri, noted: "[A]nd so anarchism comes to be known precisely for the illogical character and ridiculousness which ignorance and bourgeois calumny have attributed to anarchist doctrines."

The effect of the media's focus on anarchism's most embarrassing side has been advantageous for elites; by focusing laser like on the looniest elements of anarchism, the entire movement can be marginalized and discredited. This follows a historical pattern in which anarchist activists are ignored by the establishment until one does something so antisocial or outlandish that elites can score cheap points by reporting it. If the public sees only the primitivist wing of anarchism, it will be unlikely to support anything associated with anarchism. Understandably, few people want to support something that is hostile to the life-saving medical care, information technology, and electronic entertainment they enjoy.

The media's gravitation towards primitivism has pressured other parts of the anarchist movement to accept it as well. The University of Michigan's Joseph A. Labadie collection, commonly regarded as an "archive of record" for the anarchist movement, recently decided to admit the papers of unabomber Theodore Kaczynski into its vaults. This includes interviews where Kaczynski reports on attempts to have a dialogue with terrorist Timothy McVeigh, dragging again the shadiest figures of modern politics into anarchist history. The shelving of Kaczynski's murderous *Unabomber Manifesto* alongside classics by Emma Goldman and others is presumably something the anarchist community will have to live with. The acquisition is of further irony, given that the figure for which the University of Michigan's archive is named, labor activist Joseph Labadie, favored public control over industrial society, not a Kaczynski-style mail bombing of it. As well, Kaczynski admirer John Zerzan works with a self-styled "Green Anarchy" collective in Oregon. When *Z Magazine* editor Michael Albert approached John Zerzan to debate primitivism, Zerzan ultimately sniffed, "As an anarchist, I'm not interested."

The waxing influence of primitive thinkers threatens to redefine the character of the anarchist tradition for future generations. It also threatens to divert eager new activists into its theoretical cul-de-sac where nothing revolutionary can ever be accomplished. Worst of all, the primitivist agenda would result in mass scale atrocity if its objectives were ever met: society would be stripped of the medical care, shelter, food supplies, distribution networks, and even language (!) that humans depend upon for life. That primitivists play casually with such globally catastrophic notions speaks volumes about their real concern for human well being.

## 2. An Ignoble Savage

> I am as free as Nature first made man,
> Ere the base laws of servitude began,
> When wild in woods the noble savage ran.
>
> —John Dryden, *The Congum of Granada*, 1670.

Primitivists emphasize how good ancient humans had it. In this, they strongly echo Rousseau's ruminations upon the Noble Savage. Rousseau stated in *Discourse on Inequality* that the era of primitive man "must have been the happiest and most durable of epochs. The more we reflect on it, the more we shall find that this state was the least subject to revolutions, and

altogether the very best that man could experience." Rousseau stated further that "[t]he example of savages, most of whom have been found in this state, seems to prove that men were meant to remain in it, that it is the real youth of the world, and that all subsequent advances have been apparently so many steps towards the perfection of the individual, but in reality towards the decrepitude of the species." Primitive man enjoyed a simple, blissful life, he said: "The produce of the earth furnished him with all he needed, and instinct told him how to use it. Hunger and other appetites made him at various times experience various modes of existence; and among these was one which urged him to propagate his species—a blind propensity that, having nothing to do with the heart, produced a merely animal act."

In *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, Fredy Perlman acknowledges the debt to Rousseau—and even to John Zerzan—reporting that they are "among contemporaries whose lights I've borrowed." Perlman tells us that prehistoric humans "lived in a condition J.J. Rousseau called 'the state of nature.'" In fact, urges Perlman, "Rousseau's term should be brought back into common use" because it "makes the armor [of civilization] visible." "Insist that 'freedom' and 'state of nature' are synonyms," Perlman writes, "and the cadavers [that is, apologists of civilization] will try to bite you." Furthemore, "the state of nature is a community of freedoms," he writes. A state of freedom "was the environment of the first human communities, and such it remained for thousands of generations."

In fact, evidence about how the first human communities fared, or around what principles social life was organized, is sparse. What evidence we do have should caution us from projecting our own fantasies onto them, however, or asserting them as desirable alternatives for the future. It should also go without saying that *at all times* humanity has lived in "a state of nature," including right now. That is, the natural world is still here and ensconces us, even if aspects of it are modified. Perlman's "state of nature" also, by the way, includes hurricanes, loathsome diseases, life-threatening elements, and other unpleasantness. It is doubtful that any primitivist would run headlong into a tornado in order to experience the "state of nature"; if he held his or others' well being in any regard, he might wish for a weather tracking system (for example) to tell us when tornadoes were coming, so that we could avoid them.

In his book *Future Primitive*, John Zerzan agrees with Rousseau and Perlman: Human "life before domestication/agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health." Zerzan, Eric Blair, and the Green Anarchy Collective issued a joint statement furthering the point: "Prior to civilization there generally existed ample leisure time, considerable gender autonomy and equality, a non-destructive approach to the natural world, the absence of organized violence and strong health and robusticity." George Bradford (David Watson), editor of the primitivist *Fifth Estate*, writes that primitive man's society is "affluent because its needs are few, all its desires easily met. Its tool kit is elegant and lightweight, its outlook linguistically complex and conceptually profound yet simple and accessible to all. Its culture is expansive and ecstatic. It is propertyless and communal, egalitarian and cooperative.… It is anarchic… free of work…. It is a dancing society, a singing society, a celebrating society, a dreaming society."

In short, not only were pre-technological societies pleasant places in which to live, they closely approximated the anarchist ideal. How true is this, really?

Conservatives often fixate upon an idealized—and unrealistic—notion of the past, lamenting that society has grown far away from it. Starting with Christianity, which agonizes over humanity's expulsion from its idyll in the Garden of Eden, backwards-looking ideologies have hoped to

restore society to an imagined Golden Age, when things were better. The Nazi Party presented a story of a once-great Teutonic civilization in decline, the victim of Jewish parasites and communist forces; contemporary U.S. conservatives hearken to the wholesome values of America's Puritan past, and so on. The primitivists simply trump them all by going back the farthest, proposing to reconstruct prehistory (or, alternately, "the Iron Age") in our modern midst. The problem with such ideas is that they posit a romanticized vision of an earlier era, inconsistent with the often unpleasant realities that existed.

Likewise, conservatives often maintain that "poor people really have it good," much as primitivists do. Gar Smith's assurance that "there is a lot of quality to be had in poverty," for example, echoes much of the anti-welfare rhetoric one hears coming from the right (viz., the poor are really not bad off because they have television or fast food; and besides, being poor builds character, etc.). Certainly, anyone who wants to live in a shack and go it alone without electricity or heating, as primitivist idol Ted Kaczynski did, should be free to do so; but the poor blacks of the Mississippi Delta, where Kaczynski's choice of living conditions are day-to-day reality whether it is preferred or not, should have access to many of the amenities (medical care, heating, better choice of foods, etc.) that Kaczynski chose to abandon. Anarchists have traditionally favored such a redistribution of society's wealth and benefits—and it is in fact the ruling class, much like Zerzan Company, that prefers to see its workers living primitively.

Primitivists' fixation upon the imagined mental vigor and "robusticity" of pre-technological peoples is old hat as well. Again, this notion gained much currency among the European far right in the early 20$^{th}$ century, which conceived of, for example, the Anglo-Saxon race as a hardy, earthy (*volkish*) people softened by liberal, effeminate notions of welfare statism and progress. Germans, in fact, enacted racial hygiene laws to preserve the most robust strains of the species. Murray Bookchin has noted this ideological tendency in the reactionary romanticism of Nazi sympathizer Martin Heidegger. As well, Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier have explored the problem in-depth in the excellent *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*. There is in fact a contemporary right wing school of thought that claims modern medicines and even environmental protections are bad because they contribute to the "softening" of humans; that is, funding for medical care or environmental regulation should not be increased because it is through such means that humans trade in "robusticity" for diminished racial resilience. Experts who assert that there is a kind of metaphysical wholesomeness in living a rugged, difficult lifestyle can be found sitting in some of the nation's most odious conservative think tanks, reaping large salaries from environmentally destructive (or simply misanthropic) corporations. Good medical care, subsidies to help with home heating costs—these amount to mollycoddling, business owners assert. Real Americans, they maintain, realize that hardship builds moral fiber and physical stamina—an idea that conveniently justifies business in behaving as irresponsibly as it wants. In insisting upon the physical and moral "robusticity" that is supposed to accompany primitive living conditions, primitivists echo this dubious strain of reactionary thinking.

However, primitivists, unlike the corporate elite, claim to oppose environmental ruin. Indeed, environmental degradation is one of the central primitivist grievances with "civilization." The "strong health and robusticity" of primitive man arose not through struggle and hardship, primitivists tell us, but through "ample leisure time," "affluence," and other perks that primitives enjoyed. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, primitive humans had all their needs provided for, but they also stayed fit.

So, who were the peoples that primitivists seek to emulate? What were their lives really like? This is, in fact, where the fraud of primitivist thought reveals itself most clearly.

One of the central flaws in primitivist logic is the conflation of millennia of various cultures and societies into one entity—"primitive man." In fact, in books like *Future Primitive* or the recent *Running on Emptiness*, Zerzan dances across disparate eras and continents wildly, selectively noting features of this or that radically different tribal, non-industrialized, or prehistoric people to build his case that there was a common and wiser way of life that all humans once shared. Much like ethnocentric Europeans who can distinguish between European cultures but can not do the same for the many cultures within Africa, Asia, or the at-least 500 nations of native North America, primitivists often use the "primitive man" concept as a catch-all into which they insert their favored virtues.

A composite of "primitive man" is erected in primitivist thought; glossed over in this process are the less-than-ideal aspects of most tribal societies. For example, primitivists conveniently fail to mention the religious notions, patriarchal structures, or strict traditions (like clitoridectomy, painful coming-of-age rituals, etc.) present in some non-industrial clans. Perhaps they are aware that most would find these undesirable. As Hoxie Neale Fairchild wrote in the study *Noble Savage*, "The [European notion of the] true Noble Savage arises from a combination of disillusion about the here and now with illusion about the there and then."

## 3. What is the primitivist ideal?

### No Language

"Words are very unnecessary/they can only do harm," the pop group Depeche Mode sing in "Enjoy the Silence." This is a romantic notion, but without words the songs of Depeche Mode and others couldn't be performed by anyone.

According to the Green Anarchy collective, language is out. That is, people (primitivists wildly conjecture) were psychologically healthier when they stood in mute awe—or fear—of everything, unable to communicate with one another. The obnoxious primitivist Feral Faun (less pretentiously, David Watkins, not to be confused with *Fifth Estate* editor David Watson) hisses at "language with its conceptual limits," presumably preferring the conceptual limitlessness enjoyed by the dumb and the mute. Alternatively, as Zerzan infers at his wildest, "we should instead communicate telepathically." "Only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning," Zerzan muses at primitivism.com.

Of course, it is unlikely that anatomically modern *homo sapiens*—that is, humanity as it has anatomically existed since about 100,000 years ago—has ever gone without speaking. According to anthropologist Kenneth Feder, it is likely that approximately 1.8 million years ago *homo erectus* first developed the capability to talk:

> [T]he base of the *erectus* cranium—the basicranium—is far more like that of modern humans than of *homo habilis* or apes. Because the muscles involved in the production of speech are connected to the basicranium, this may indicate that the physical capability for human or human like speech production was present in *homo erectus*. From this, [Mt. Sinai School of Medicine anatomist Jeffrey] Laitman has concluded that *homo erectus* could produce speech at the level of a modern six-year-old.

There is no way to tell *absolutely*, of course, as no other records exist from such a time to substantiate any rival hypotheses. There are no audio recordings from 1.5 million B.C.E., in other words, to indicate whether people spoke then. Nevertheless, Zerzan, unencumbered by facts, writes in *Running on Emptiness* that humans once existed in a "non-linguistic state," but have "declined" since then thanks to acquiring language. He adds, "Literacy ushered us into the society of divided and reduced senses." "Verbal communication," he continues in a line of pure conjecture, "is part of the movement away from a face-to-face social reality, making feasible physical separateness."

Primitivist musings like this have all the character of "someone riffing ideas off the top of his head who has done no actual research into what he's talking about," John Johnson points out in a recent *Imagine* article. (Note, incidentally, that Bradford of *Fifth Estate* admires the primitive "outlook [that was] linguistically complex and conceptually profound yet simple and accessible to all," revealing that there is much ideological inconsistency among the primitivists—and let's not even bother with how Bradford could "know" this.) In fact, much primitivist theory relies on wild speculation about how humans organized social life in eras fiom which we have no written records. Because the least is known about such eras, primitivists can project their wildest fantasies onto them and never worry about being proven wrong.

Of course, anarchists have traditionally cited language as evidence of man's social nature. "What is speech?" Bakunin asked. "It is communication. It is the conversation of one human individual with many other individuals. Only through this conversation and in it can animalistic man transform himself into a human being, that is, a thinking being. His individuality as a man, his freedom, is thus the product of the collectivity." Chomsky and other linguists have posited an innate human predisposition to the use of language, despite Zerzan's impassioned insistence that a theory of innate language is "a grave and reactionary error." In fact, in 2001 *National Geographic* reported that scientists had discovered a gene, FOXP2, "linked to language and speech, suggesting that our human urge to babble and chat is innate, and that our linguistic abilities are at least partially hardwired."

To most people, language seems the last thing worthy of abolition. Many of us enjoy the work of poets, who use language as their paintbrush to enrich—not impoverish—our cultural experience. Singing and storytelling are cultural forms valued by most humans, as well. Other examples abound, too numerous to mention.

## No Technology

No technology above simple tools is to be allowed in the primitivist utopia, either: "Technology is distinct from simple tools in many regards," primitivists claim. Primitivists define technology in a manner that suits their ends, however: it is "more of a process or concept than a static form," they explain. "It is a complex system involving division of labor, resource extraction, and exploitation for the benefit of those who implement its process."

Now, a "system of division of labor, resource extraction, and exploitation for the benefit of those who implement its process" is actually a description of the workings of capitalism. Technology, however, which existed long before capitalism, is defined by most scientists as the practical application of knowledge towards problem solving; alternately, most anthropologists agree, it is a manner of accomplishing a task using technical methods. Despite the protestations of primitivists, most anthropologists also classify stone tools as a type of technology. Other technology

includes the construction of crude wells for securing water as well as the most advanced equipment used to save human life. Deprived of such things, countless humans would immediately die.

Primitivists say they fear that, like the Skynet computer in the movie *Terminator*, technology will develop its own sentience and work to eradicate humanity. "It's questionable whether the ruling class (who still benefit economically and politically from the Technological System) really have any control over their 'Frankenstein monster' at this point," Zerzan and the Green Anarchy collective warn, dramatically suggesting that perhaps technology *already* works by virtue of its own prerogatives!

In *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, Perlman offers a similar idea, refering to the "Frankenstein monster" as the "Earthwrecker," which "does have a body, a monstrous body, a body that has become more powerful than the Biosphere. It may be a body without any life of its own. It may be a dead thing, a huge cadaver. It may move its slow thighs only when living beings inhabit it. Nevertheless, its body is what does the wrecking." Perlman presents the possibility that humans *may* control the "Earthwrecker"—but then again, he suggests, maybe they don't! ("It *may* [my emphasis] move its slow thighs only when living beings inhabit it"—a pretentious sentence in which it is difficult to find any real meaning.)

It's interesting that primitivist activists regularly employ the "Frankenstein monster" to make mass-produced journals (viz., *Green Anarchy Magazine*, electronically reproduced on the web) and web sites (viz., www.insurgentdesire.org.uk), and to participate in e-mail discussion lists. Anecdotally, this author can vouch for having met many primitivists who enjoy their Playstations in their heated apartments, rent DVDs (*Fight Club*, *Instinct*, *Matrix*, *Terminator*), and otherwise gladly partake in privileges unavailable to real-world tribes people. Delicately shielded from "robusticity"-causing conditions (the elements, in other words), they pontificate on how everyone else ought to give up their amenities. Presumably, primitivists are waiting for everyone else to go primitive first. When asked by a reporter if the fact that he watches television might make him a bit of a hypocrite, John Zerzan weakly offered, "Like other people, I have to be narcotized."

Elsewhere, George Bradford refers to the "Frankenstein monster" of technology as "the industrial hydra"; Zerzan dubs it the "everywhere-triumphant Megamachine"; and Theodore Kaczynski simply cites the "technological system" as if it were a social order unto itself. The intellectual laziness of these concepts is apparent in how they gloss over the particular class relations of statism/capitalism. In the capitalist system, it is true that capitalists direct much technology towards misanthropic ends—demonstrating that it is class rule that determines how technology is applied, and not vice versa. Due to the poverty of their analysis and intellectual sloppiness, however, primitivists cannot make even such obvious distinctions, and condemn technology wholesale.

Of course, *harmful* technology is just that—harmful. It is hard to imagine a positive use for nuclear weaponry, for example, or for biological and chemical weapons. But primitivists have a long way to go to convince the public that technology *invariably* entails coercive social relations ("invariably" is a word that merits some reflection here). They also have a long way to go to convince us that people like physicist Stephen Hawking should be left to die (in Social Darwinian fashion) simply because they require technology to live. As well, John Zerzan's reading glasses would have to be cast aside in a primitivist society, as would the lens-crafting technology that enables others with eyesight as bad as his to see.

Let us not play around with these concepts idly. When primitivists advocate eliminating technology, they advocate the wholesale slaughter or starvation of billions, of humans worldwide.

### No Agriculture

Zerzanite and Green Anarchy primitivists would prevent the domestication of food and animals as well. Domestication of crops began around 12,000 years ago in the Near East, marking the shift from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles—which most primitivists like—to more sedentary, settled social formations, which most primitivists dislike. According to the Green Anarchy collective, growing crops "was the first mistake in the series leading to modernity."

"Agriculture must be overcome, as domestication," Zerzan writes in "On the Transition: Postscript to *Future Primitive*." Rather than enjoy huge, equitably distributed agricultural surpluses, as classical anarchists like Peter Kropotkin would have for humanity, primitivists would have people form into hunter-gatherer units and forage for wild, naturally occurring fruits and vegetables. This immediately presents a dilemma, as John Johnson notes in *Imagine* in "Zerzan—Buffoon": what if a rebellious hunter-gatherer "thought, 'Hey, I like strawberries; I sure wish there was a way to get them more regularly than just having to stumble across them in the wild'"? In order to preserve primitivist society, primitivist police would have to root out this kind of dissidence immediately. Cultivation of crops would have to be banned.

Again, let us reflect soberly on the consequences of the belief that agriculture ought to be eliminated: Deprived of agriculture, the majority of the global population would immediately perish.

Given these three criteria alone, it is clear that no existing society could be called primitivist. In fact, it is not clear that any culture we have knowledge of accords to such strict ideals. Societies lacking language, agriculture, and technology are few and far between. Even the living, non-industrial tribes that primitivists regularly cite in their analyses—such as the !Kung Bushmen of Africa (see *Future Primitive*, Perlman's *Against His-story*, or Bob Black's "Primitive Affluence," for example)—speak a type of language. And even if the !Kung do not employ technology *as primitivists define it* (an important distinction, since primitivists define it to suit their agenda), or domesticate animals, there are other respects in which aspects of theirs and other tribal lifestyles are not anarchistic or desirable for others.

## 4. Realities of Tribal Lifeways

According to anthropologist Lorna Marshall, whose research on the !Kung has been reported by the primitivist-beloved Marshall Sahlins, "Except for food and water (important exceptions!)… they all had what they needed or could make what they needed." Marshall's notation that food and water can be "important exceptions" to primitive "affluence" is well taken. *Fifth Estate*'s George Bradford compassionately concedes that "primal humans" are "capable of experiencing occasional hunger" but reassures us that they "sometimes [chose] hunger to enhance interrelatedness, to play, or to see visions." It remains to be seen how well the primitivist notion of "hunger as a means of play" will catch on with the modern public.

Furthermore, anthropologist Edwin Wilemsen notes that living !Kung cultural practices observed by anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins or Lorna Marshall are themselves the product of millennia of adaptation: the !Kung used to hunt elephants, practiced horticulture and other

types of farming, and had skirmishes with chiefdoms in eastern Africa that drove them into their current habitat (the Kalahari Desert), where they are observed by contemporary researchers. This is contrary to what Fredy Perlman implies in a statement that "the !Kung people miraculously survived into our own exterminating age." Of course, it is technically true that the !Kung have survived, as have Native Americans and Aborigines, but Perlman implies the !Kung are a kind of living anachronism whose tribal ways preserve life in "the natural state." As well, University of Illinois-Chicago anthropologist Lawrence H. Keeley notes that the !Kung "homicide rate from 1920 to 1955 was four times that of the United States and twenty to eighty times that of major industrial nations during the 1950s and 1960s." Far from representing a pristine picture of "primitive man," in other words, !Kung society, as any other, has changed over the centuries to adapt to changing needs. This all underscores the point that existing hunter-gatherer tribes do not necessarily provide a window back into time.

In this regard, amateur primitivist pseudo-anthropology warrants a strong caution from Kenneth L. Feder, a practicing anthropologist at Central Connecticut State University. He writes that knowledge of early human "social systems—how they related to each other within groups, how they defined 'family,' who they considered suitable mates—is, perhaps, forever out of reach. We are relegated to using living primates or hunting and gathering groups of human beings, neither of whom should be considered all that reliable as models for prehistoric hominid behavior." But trifles such as scientific knowledge do not prevent the Green Anarchy collective from proclaiming that prior to 8,000 B.C.E. "a natural state of anarchy… had prevailed for about 2 million years."

Thanks to research by other historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, we know that other non-industrialized peoples besides the !Kung did not always live in egalitarian social formations, either. For example, the 500 nations that existed in North America before 1500 represented a diversity of cultural, political, and economic systems. Some native societies were resolutely patriarchal, such as the Powhatan Confederacy that settlers at Jarnestown, Virginia encountered in the 1600s. Others incorporated matriarchal and democratic aspects of governance into tribal life; Iroquois women, for example, made most of the important decisions in their society. (A matriarchal society, it is important to remember, is still of course a *hierarchical* society.) Moreover, Native Americans domesticated corn and tobacco, eventually teaching Europeans how to grow them. These facts are important for those attempting an honest evaluation of non-European tribal lifeways. It is impossible to abstract the estimated 12,000 native cultures of the "New World" before 1492 into one composite "noble savage" or "primitive man" type.

Of course, native tribes did not live in a nation-state system such as Europeans developed, nor did they have property rights as Europeans conceived of them. However, natives did fight back when they felt settlers encroached too far inland. In other words, many tribes apparently held some basic notions of territoriality, evidenced not only in skirmishes with Europeans but in inter-tribal conflicts as well.

Most, if not all, native societies practiced some type of religion. The rich variety of Native American creation myths is known to many. Anarchism, by contrast, has traditionally posited atheism—in fact, *anti*theism—as the only belief system congruent with the scientific understanding of reality. This is also quite opposed to primitivist icon Ted Kaczynski's belief in "the Grandfather Rabbit, the grandfather who was responsible for the existence of all other rabbits." Kaczynski notes this supernatural being "was able to disappear, [and] that is why you couldn't catch him and why you would never see him… Every time I shot a snowshoe rabbit [in the wild], I would al-

ways say 'thank you Grandfather Rabbit.'" Similar pagan beliefs (or delusions) were widely held by other hunter-gatherer cultures.

Of course, this does not mean that anarchists wish to forcibly impose atheism on others. In an anarchist society, people would be free to believe whatever they wanted. But an anarchist society worthy of the name would not allow those holding religious beliefs to impose them upon others, nor would religious beliefs be allowed to influence decisions of production and distribution. Although individual belief in mystical forces would be tolerated, most anarchists would probably continue to criticize the irrationality of those who believed in the supernatural. The cultural climate of most Native American societies was far from atheist or irreligious; in fact, tribal belief systems often served to legitimize the unequal distribution of power between tribal members, and permeated almost every aspect of everyday life.

Before European influence, many native systems of exploitation were already in place, as well. The Mexica (Aztec) Indians of Central America, for example, who began as roving bands of mercenaries, had by 1400 established a broad empire centered on the worship of the war god Huitzilopochtli. The Mexica exacted tribute from subjugated villages and sacrificed as many as 20,000 humans per year to their imperial deity. The Incas built an empire in South America that was even larger than that of their Central American cousins. Of course, European societies were (and are) bloodier on a mass scale, and certainly more expansive, as history has clearly shown. These are facts that need not be forgotten in any honest evaluation of other social systems. But neither should they lead us to idealize other social systems.

Zerzan and other primitivists often claim that pre-civilized social groups enjoyed lifestyles of ease, relatively free from disease and hardship. For example, the Green Anarchy collective writes, "Prior to civilization there generally existed… strong health and robusticity." Before European civilization, however, it is not clear that many natives always enjoyed either, let alone both. Historians James L. Roark, Sarah Stage, and others write: "At one site in western Kentucky, which dates to about 2500 to 2000 BC, archaeologists found enough burials to allow them to calculate that the life expectancy at birth for these Woodland people was slightly over 18 years." According to estimates by researchers at the UCLA Gerontology Research Group, Homo sapiens' average life expectancy 50,000 years ago was 10 years, owing to death by disease, predators and accidents. In addition, hunter-gatherers developed other ailments associated with their lifestyles: at one Hopewell site dating to about 100 B.C.E., excavations revealed that hunters "tended to have arthritis of the elbow associated with stress to the elbow joint from using spear throwers." Of course, in a primitivist society such painful conditions would simply have to be endured.

Additionally, the mound-building peoples of the Mississippian culture developed forms of hierarchy and domination as well:

> One Cahokia burial mound [dating to approx. 1000 C.E.] suggests the authority a great chief exercised. One man—presumably the chief—was buried with the dismembered bodies of several people, perhaps enemies or slaves; three men and three women of high status, perhaps the chiefs relatives; four men, perhaps servants or guards, whose heads and hands had been cut off; and fifty young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three who had evidently been strangled. Such a mass sacrifice shows the power a Cahokian chief wielded and the obedience he commanded.

In *Running on Emptiness*, Zerzan claims, "The foraging Comanche maintained their nonviolent ways for centuries before the European invasion, becoming violent only upon contact with marauding civilization." But in *War Before Civilization*, according to John Johnson, anthropologist Lawrence H. Keeley produces evidence that "Contrary to arguments that tribal violence increased after contact with Europeans, the percentage of burials in coastal British Columbia bearing evidence of violent traumas was actually LOWER after European contact (13 percent from 1774 to 1874) than the very high levels (20 to 32 percent) evidenced in prehistoric periods." Additionally, it is known that even without European help Comanches harassed Wichita settlements in present-day Texas into the 18th century. The Wichita had themselves moved to the Red River area by the 1700s to escape hostile Osage Indians in the Midwest.

A side note is in order before continuing: Some primitivists may protest that focusing on the less-than-romantic realities of native tribal history "plays into the hands of" those who unjustly oppressed the American Indians. That is, by stating that natives engaged in internecine warfare or were mostly patriarchal, etc., one is merely "playing into the hands of" European conquerors, who highlighted native "savagery" in order to oppress them. This "plays into the hands of"-type argumentation stunts many discussions on the left, and so it is worth quoting George Orwell, who wrote:

> Whenever A and B are in opposition to one another, anyone who attacks or criticises A is accused of aiding and abetting B. And it is often true, objectively and on a short-term analysis, that he is making things easier for B. Therefore, say the supporters of A, shut up and don't criticize: or at least criticize "constructively," which in practice always means favourably. And from this it is only a short step to arguing that the suppression and distortion of known facts is the highest duty of a journalist.

For purposes of argument, we could say that Orwell's "A" above represents primitivism, while "B" represents apologists for European exploitation. (Of course, the argument of this pamphlet is on the side of neither A [primitivism] nor B [European exploitation], but rather on the side of "C" [an anarchist society].)

It is very important to recognize the stupidity and destructiveness of the "if you're not with us, you're on the side of our enemies" accusation. In the first place, a moment's reflection reveals that *both* sides in a dispute can easily hurl this canard at those who refuse to side with them. It also introduces an absurd contradiction: if both sides are correct that "if you're not with us, you're on the side of our enemies," those who refuse to take either side are guilty of simultaneously taking *both* sides. In practice, the only purpose of this accusation is to intimidate critics and to silence dissent. (It's very disturbing that anyone who calls him or herself an anarchist would ever stoop to such slimy tactics.)

Getting back to the question of the characteristics of primitive societies, it is known that European conquerors were far more brutal in their rape and plunder of native lands than almost any native societies ever were to each other. This fact, however, need not distort any accurate depiction of what tribal lifeways were really like. We deserve an honest picture of events; we gain no real understanding by filtering them through ideological biases. And from such an honest picture, we can admit that there were many, many admirable things about native societies, but that few, if any, represent desirable alternatives to our current social situation, much less alternatives that conform to anarchist ideals of direct democracy and the removal of religious authoritarianism from the public sphere.

The Green Anarchy Collective shifts course, however, and argues that, despite the primitivist citation of many native societies, the only truly acceptable primitive societies were in fact those that existed before the invention of writing approximately 11,000 years ago. In other words, the prehistoric societies of non-literate peoples are those that primitivists really wish to model their utopia on. (Again, see the Zerzan, Blair, and Green Anarchy document "Notes on Primitivism.") Some other primitivists do not wish to recede this far into the past ("only to the Iron Age," say some), but for the moment, it is worth studying the Zerzanian/Green Anarchy contention.

So, what did prehistoric human social formations actually look like? What were the values of prehistoric hominids, and around what principles—if any—was their social life organized? Without the written record, their social ideas remain largely a mystery. It is unfortunate that Emory University historian Michael P. Roark, et. al., have to remind us that "[n]o documents chronicle [prehistoric] births and deaths, comings and goings, victories and defeats. No diaries chart their daily lives. No letters record their thoughts and emotions. No songs or stories capture their musings about who they were and what was important to them."

Of course, elementary concessions to logic do not impede primitivist fantasy. Referring to ways of life that existed in the dark eras of human prehistory, John Zerzan complains in *Future Primitive* that nowadays Neanderthals are "much-maligned." Contrary to the strong health and "robusticity" primitivists attribute to the Neanderthal, anthropologists Christopher Stringer and Clive Gamble note, "The high incidence of degenerative joint disease in Neanderthals is perhaps not surprising given what we know of the hard lives they led and the wear and tear this would have produced on their bodies. But the prevalence of serious injuries is more surprising, and indicates just how dangerous life was, even for those who did not manage to reach 'old age' in Neanderthal societies." As well, it is important to remember that prior to their becoming extinct more than 30,000 years ago, according to Ian Tattersall, curator of physical anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, "[p]hysical differences in the Neanderthal species were so distinct that they would have represented a completely separate species from *homo sapiens*." There was also "no biologically meaningful exchange of genes between the two species." In other words, anatomically modern humans (*homo sapiens*) coexisted with Neanderthals in Europe as a different species, and did not develop from them, as some primitivists ignorantly insinuate. "[M]odern humans are the sole surviving twig on a branching bush produced by evolution," Tattersall reminds us. "We're not the pinnacle of a ladder that our ancestors climbed, but an altogether different experiment." In fact, Zerzan's "much-maligned" and genetically different species, the Neanderthal, is thought by many anthropologists to have been wiped out through warfare with *homo sapiens* (the Cro-Magnon)—that is, our direct ancestors—despite the naive, speculative Green Anarchist statement that "civilization inaugurated warfare."

If primitivists wish to posit a certain conception of social organization as ideal for the future of humanity, then let them do so. But to say humans have *already* lived in anarchist societies in the sense imagined by the classical anarchist tradition is untenable. To misrepresent the scientific record, to conjure out of the past examples for which evidence is sketchy at best, to speculate wildly about how prehistoric humans lived and to assert such speculations as fact—this is to commit nothing less than fraud. In this regard, primitive pseudoscientific ramblings resemble those of T.D. Lysenko, the Soviet geneticist and agricultural commissar, who attempted to make nature's laws appear to conform to the ideological biases of Leninism, often by falsifying his data. Very much like fundamentalist Christians opposed to the theory of evolution, ideology-driven

primitivists play with the paleoanthropological record, discarding data that conflicts with their predetermined conclusions.

Doubtless, it is valuable to trace the origins of warfare, the state, and other forms of violent domination. Anarchists since Peter Kropotkin have done this. Nevertheless, Columbia University anthropologist Morton H. Fried reports, "There are no authentic written records from which the development of a pristine state can be directly read." Coercive hierarchical structures are generally thought to have arisen through control over nascent agricultural surpluses, aided by religious beliefs and ultimately a sacerdotal caste that legitimized inequality. It seems perverse to suggest that, rather than eliminating the unjust social relationships that remove food surpluses from public use, we get rid of the food surpluses themselves! But again, that is what many primitivists want.

Also, only the most misinformed could agree with the wildly untenable primitivist claim that in prehistory—that is, history for which there is no written record—humans lived in "a state of natural anarchy… for about 2 million years." And even if it could be proven that they did (and it cannot), what would this mean for us now?

Regardless of what human societies did for the two million-year period for which scant knowledge exists, whether what happened was admirable or atrocious, we still find ourselves in the present dealing with forms of oppression that exist *now*. That hominids have the capacity to live in stateless societies was well known before primitivists took to photocopiers and the Internet to remind us. So, too, has history told us of the human capacity for cruelty and violence—two things not limited to technological civilizations. These facts shed light on the human condition, but they do not dictate our future. The past suggests that a statist society is not inevitable, but it also does not necessarily tell us what is to be done in the modern era. The past defines possibilities, but it is still up to humans in the present to decide what their future will look like. From the data we have, it seems clear that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the earliest hominids would not be a viable, much less desirable, option for many.

## 5. Primitivist Attacks on Anarchism

Not content simply to attack the fields of anthropology and history, or the reader's intelligence, primitivists also rail against the tradition they claim to be a part of—the anarchist tradition. In an article in the pretentiously titled *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, for example, John Zerzan complains of "an anarchy dominated by the productionist/workerist/syndicalist perspectives of… Murray Bookchin and Noam Chomsky." "George Bradford" groans that primitivism's enemies are "corporate engineers and leftist/syndicalist critics," amazingly equating the two. The especially noxious Feral Faun/David Watkins claims that "anarcho-syndicalists embrace the values essential to capitalism," while the Green Anarchy Collective writes at *Z-Net* that "[i]nsofar as anarchists cling to the left and define themselves in its terms (e.g. anarcho-syndicalists) they will go nowhere." A recent issue of primitivist-friendly *A:AJODA* also devoted much space to polemics against anarcho-communism and "organizationalism," as well.

Anarcho-syndicalism, of course, was the highly organized revolutionary strategy of the great anarchist movements in Spain, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, and elsewhere. Prominent anarcho-syndicalists, living and dead, include Rudolf Rocker, Noam Chomsky, Sam Dolgoff, Diego Abad de Santillan, Gregory Maximoff, Bueneventura Durutti, and Emile Pouget. Prominent

anarcho-communists have included Alexander Berkman, Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Nestor Makhno, and Peter Kropotkin. Others that have worked within this tradition include Mikhail Bakunin, Daniel Guerin, Murray Bookchin, Janet Biehl, and Albert Meltzer. In other words, this is the mainstream of anarchism. According to primitive thinkers, however, the anarchist tradition is wrong. (And if it is so wrong, then one wonders why they feel the need to attach themselves to it.)

In *Against His-story*, Perlman berates those who advocate the self-management thesis. "They would supplant the state with a network of computer centers, factories, and mines coordinated 'by the workers themselves' or by an Anarchist union," he warns. "They would not call this arrangement a State. The name-change would exorcise the beast," Perlman incredibly states. He sees no difference whatsoever between a hierarchical, authoritarian society based on violence, in which nearly everyone who works must follow orders in an almost military manner, and a society in which people freely and collectively control their own work lives, and in which no government intrudes into our private lives.

In stating that anarcho-syndicalists merely want a name-change, Perlman echoes the worst anarcho-capitalist polemicists, who state that an anarchist syndicate is really "a state by another name." That is, apparently any organized group of people with some type of decision-making structure is a "state." By this logic, aren't primitivist groups also states? The self-management thesis that Perlman attacks is at root a thesis of human self-determination; that is, it asserts that workers and their communities should have decision-making power over resources and structures (mines, computer centers, etc.) in their area. Do primitivists not believe in this? If primitivists do not believe that communities should be self-managed—that is, managed by the people living in them—then how shall decisions affecting the collectivity be coordinated within them? The desire for self-management says nothing about the decisions communities will make, such as whether to continue to utilize or close up mines—only that control will be shifted to worker and community hands, and away from capitalists and politicians.

Perlman's characterization is wrong, but not unique.

Primitivists regularly advance two notions when defending their views against anarchists. One is that, no matter how many primitive screeds are read, anyone who objects to primitivism "does not understand it" or "has not read enough about it." Presumably, to understand primitivism is to agree with it. (It's common for devout members of religious groups to make the same claim, which highlights the similarities between primitivists and religionists.) Primitivists seem not to be able to grasp the possibility that one could disagree with their views precisely because they *are* understood.

The second notion is that, although they allow themselves the freedom to polemicize viciously against traditional anarchists, they cannot be criticized in turn. Anarchist criticism of their views is "divisive," "sectarian," or "uncomradely." Anarchists are routinely presented with the pathetic sight of primitivists and post-leftists viciously attacking classical anarchism, only to thereafter run behind the black flag and claim "but we're all in this together" when the fire is returned. In the world of primitive thinking, only primitive thoughts deserve to be advanced.

In fact, those who can access the Internet or who have the time and money to read many current anarchist periodicals are probably familiar with the growing gulf between primitivism and the tendency within the anarchist movement that maintains a class-struggle, but not anti-technological, approach. Primitivism claims hostility to traditional left ideas, as evidenced by dour rants about "workerists" above, including those embodied in the classical anarchist tradition.

"Post-leftists," as anti-left primitivists prefer to be called, derive their appellation in the main from the book *Anarchy After Leftism*, written by known police informant and attorney Bob Black. In *A:AJODA* #48 (Fall-Winter 1999–2000), John Zerzan wrote under the "Post-Left Anarchy!" forum, identifying his brand of primitivism as a form of post-leftist thought.

The division within the anarchist movement between primitivists and other anarchists is particular to the U.S., where hipsters often claim any number of bizarre ideas under a rubric of "anarchism" to lend them a fashionable sheen. Where the anarchist movement exists elsewhere, however, one finds it informed with classical anarchist ideas of class struggle and self-management. These same working class aspects of the anarchist movement, however, are often derided by American primitivists as reformist or "leftist." For them, leftism is quite as bad as rightism.

Of course, anarchists have always criticized the authoritarian left, because anarchists have always criticized authoritarianism. For instance, Voline's *The Unknown Revolution* and Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* are two well-known examples of the anarchist critique of Leninist tyranny. The fate of the anarchist Spanish CNT-FAI at the hands of the Stalinist, nominally leftist Partido Comunista Española is known by most anarchists. Anarchist criticism of the practices of authoritarian leftists has come as much from actual experience as from theoretical disagreement. Bakunin and Marx debated constantly, defining for many the splits between libertarian and authoritarian leftism, and it's silly and dishonest to pretend that these differences are nonexistent or trivial.

The Green Anarchy Collective writes at *Z-Net*: "The two main failed and exhausted means or approaches towards change in recent times have been liberalism and leftism.… Technology, production, hierarchy; government, ecological destruction, and ideas like 'progress' continue to go unquestioned by most who would identify with the left." The Green Anarchist proclamation to the contrary, traditional anarchists like Peter Kropotkin situated anarchism at the left wing of the socialist movement. Like Bakunin, Kropotkin believed that anarchism was a form of socialism, and that "socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality."

Additionally, primitivists often denigrate anarcho-syndicalists as secret Marxist-Leninists (or even fascists!) who would reveal themselves truly as such if ever they "gained power." This is a rather curious charge, given that the social designs advanced by anarcho-syndicalists are designed to make it impossible that *anyone* could "gain power" over others.

The primitivists' chief complaint is that "workerist" anarchists romanticize work, while primitivists want to abolish it. Anarcho-syndicalists hold work on a sort of mystical pedestal, primitivists say, refusing to acknowledge that humans are more than simple "workers." (Actually, the problem is that anarcho-syndicalists *do* see that humans are more than mere workers, but that capitalists don't!)

Most direct of the primitivist assaults on anarcho-syndicalism is Feral Faun's "The Bourgeois Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism," available on the web (at `http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/syndicali` and as a pamphlet. Feral Watkins, published in *A:AJODA* and *Fifth Estate*, absurdly claims in his piece that "anarcho-syndicalists embrace the values essential to capitalism" and that anarcho-syndicalists do this "maybe even more than the bourgeoisie." How it is possible for those other than the actual bourgeoisie to do this is not explained; by definition, the bourgeoisie are the guardians and source of bourgeois values. If anarcho-syndicalists do this "maybe even more" than their bosses—the bourgeoisie—then anarcho-syndicalists are a great danger indeed. It means they are even more reactionary than the actual power holders in this system!

The essay's main point is that "anarcho-syndicalism reflects bourgeois ideology" and that "values upheld by anarcho-syndicalists do not significantly differ from those of the more radical of the bourgeois liberal theorists, and their project, upon examination, proves to be merely the extension of the liberal project." It is unclear what Faun/Watkins means by "merely an extension of the liberal project," save that this is supposed to be bad. Indeed, most anarchists agree that the birth of anarchism owed much to the Enlightenment. "With the development of industrial capitalism," Noam Chomsky writes in Daniel Guerin's *Anarchism*, "a new and unanticipated system of injustice, it is libertarian socialism that has preserved and extended the radical humanist message of the Enlightenment and the classical liberal ideals that were perverted into an ideology to sustain the emerging social order." Anarchists do not deny that power-holders pay lip service to Enlightenment ideals while engaging in behavior that contradicts them.

Overall, Faun/Watkins' critique of anarcho-syndicalism is a good example of the primitivist critique of class struggle anarchism. To Feral Faun and other primitivists, anarcho-syndicalism was never an authentic revolutionary tendency to begin with. How could anarcho-syndicalism ever be revolutionary if it has "bourgeois origins"?

Indeed, Faun's essay castigates the behavior of the Spanish CNT during the Revolution of 1936 as "truly disgusting." Neglecting the fact that it was only *some* members of the CNT that made (easy-to-see-in-hindsight) mistakes, even those anarchists that do not consider themselves anarcho-syndicalists are inclined to agree that if ever there was an anarchist revolution, it was in Spain in the late 1930s. But not for Faun and other primitivists. To them, the broad working class movement against Spanish fascism was itself bourgeois, "maybe even more" bourgeois than the bourgeois resistance itself, representing no real libertarian alternative for the Spanish people, even if it was what a majority of them preferred. According to the primitive take on the conflict, what the workers themselves wanted in the face of Franco's dictatorship was a delusion, a "workerist" hell "even more" bourgeois than capitalism. This being the case, surely for the primitivists the defeat and attendant slaughter of the "bourgeois" Spanish anarchists was a relief, as no consistent anarchist could ever want a system set up by those "maybe even more" bourgeois than the capitalist class.

Ironically, Feral Watkins introduces his essay with a brief depiction of the historical development of capitalism that could have come from the pages of Marx. He refers to the period of "liberal bourgeois" revolutions in the late 17$^{th}$ to early 19$^{th}$ centuries. "This period was the uprising of the bourgeoisie against the feudal system and the power of the Catholic Church," Faun informs us. The irony in Faun's description lies not in the fact that it is incorrect—in fact, it is accurate to say that the revolutions of this period did upset old feudal orders and replace aristocracies with sham, bourgeois democracies—but because it shows that, try as they may, primitive post-leftists cannot escape a left-wing analysis.

Anti-left primitivists assail anarcho-syndicalists for engaging in an analysis that they say is mired in musty old leftist terms and concepts, for example. Feral Faun's interpretation of the liberal bourgeois revolutions of the Enlightenment, however, is pretty much straight up historical materialism (Marxism, in other words). Ironically, without leftist concepts buttressing them, primitivists could not write their "anti-left" diatribes. Likewise, Faun repeatedly uses terms like "bourgeoisie" that also reek of ancient leftism. Most modern anarchists refuse such terms precisely because they reek of Old Guard, Party dogmatism. (Rather than speak of the "bourgeoisie," for example, many anarchists find it more useful to note the operations of multi-nationals and the corporate elite.)

Faun then makes one of the more horrible mistakes in his essay: he claims that "the defining quality of capitalism, as compared with other economic systems, is not the existence of capitalists but the production of excess capital allowing for continued economic expansion." It is true that the defining quality of capitalism is not the existence of capitalists—but neither is it the "production of excess capital." It is the fact of capital—of class property—itself. If capitalism is anything, it is the *existence* of capital. It is not the "excess production" of it. "Capital" is itself a form of property that presupposes a certain distribution of power: the power of some to control and dispose of the things others must have access to in order to survive. "Capital" is an authoritarian relationship between individuals, and this authoritarian relation is precisely the defining aspect of capitalism for anarchists. If the "production of excess capital" is the defining quality for primitivists, and not the authoritarianism that is inherent in "capital" itself, then in what sense are primitivists anarchists?

Now, if by "production of excess capital" Feral Watkins *really* meant "extraction of surplus value," then again he is not engaging in a primitivist analysis but simply an old Marxist one. If, however, he really means that capitalism is defined as production of excess capital, then we have to ask: what is the significance of this production of "excess capital," and who is such production bad for? And, for that matter, how much capital is the "right" amount of capital to be piled up before "production of excess capital" begins?

For capitalists, there is no such thing as an excess of capital. They can never have enough. And they can certainly not be sated to a degree where they feel they have an "excess" of it. After all, that is what makes them capitalists. The more, the better. For them, there is always a shortage, no matter how much they have, and that is what drives them to expand their businesses and to accumulate ever more. There is no "excess" in their logic. Rather, there is always slightly less than is needed to sate their appetite.

For workers, however, who labor under the command of capitalists, the term "excess of capital" is a redundancy. The mere fact of capital is an excess. Its simple existence is a superfluity. Capitalism breeds excess because it is itself excess. From the working class point of view, the existence of capitalists is excessive and unnecessary; capitalists are a superfluous class of people whose elimination (as a class—not as individuals!) would increase efficiency and freedom. But then, the primitivists have no working class point of view. In fact, they show disdain to the idea that there is a meaningfully distinct working class perspective. (Of course, primitivists do slip up and refer to a "working class" fairly often, but it is not informed with any definite meaning; it is used in the same casual sense that *The New York Times* might occasionally refer to an American "working class.")

It may seem as if we are splitting hairs here, in the critique of how Faun defines capitalism. But Faun's failure to grasp the simple authoritarian dynamic that makes "capital" what it is reveals the poverty of the primitivist philosophy. Anarchists see private property in the means of production—"capital"—as a manifestation of the broader problem of authoritarianism. To anarchists, the particular type of authoritarianism that capital represents is itself the defining characteristic of capitalism. If for primitivists the defining characteristic is simply an "excess production" of privately owned means of production, then they have no meaningful anti-authoritarian analysis of our current economic system.

Faun claims that anarcho-syndicalists have core values in common with capitalists. The "values which are essential to capitalist expansion are production and progress," he says. "Anarcho-syndicalists embrace… these capitalist values," he maintains. Zerzan and others make similar

arguments, claiming that leftists blindly adhere to notions of progress as well. "Production" and "progress" taken out of context, however, could apply to almost anything. The question is, for anarchists, production of *what* and under what conditions? And, similarly, progress towards *what?* It is not enough to say that "production and progress" themselves are absolutely good or bad, devoid of context.

Production that satisfies the greatest amount of human need with the least human expenditure is a worthy goal for anarcho-syndicalists. Production that fattens profit margins the handsomest, with the least attending social responsibility, is what business owners value. These are radically different priorities. Capitalists believe in progress towards whatever will help them make money: technological progress that eliminates paid or potentially dissident labor is hailed as "progress." Disemployment and environmental ruin are "progress."

But to anarcho-syndicalists, this is the opposite of progress; to anarcho-syndicalists, "progress" is meaningful to the extent innovations occur that help feed, house, clothe, etc., the greatest number of humans with the least amount of human labor, the least use of natural resources, and the least amount of environmental damage. Innovations that expand the scope of human freedom and aid in worker self-management (i.e., human self-determination), are seen as progressive. Capitalists have no interest in this sort of progress, as it is not profitable. Primitivists do not acknowledge this obvious, basic distinction, as to do so would deprive them of a useful straw man.

"Essential to production and progress is work," Faun continues, "and so the bourgeois highly value work—and, contrary to the image painted by 'radical' labor propagandists, it is not uncommon for capitalists to work many more hours than industrial workers, but it's organizational rather than productive work."

Police informants may also work many more hours than industrial workers, but this is not the sort of work that anarcho-syndicalists value. Again, it is not simply *work* as an absolute that is valued, but the *kind* of work. "What type of work is it, and to what ends is it being conducted?" the anarcho-syndicalist asks. There is work that is harmful to the working class—such as the "work" of exploitation and of managing—and there is work that is productive and useful to society. The latter sort of work is valued by anarcho-syndicalists. The work of ruling and exploiting is not.

"Those who manage to avoid work are the moral scum of capitalist society—parasites off the working people," Faun writes, stating also that anarcho-syndicalism views shirkers in the same light. Those who do absolutely no 9-to-5 type work in our current system may or may not be acting in a manner that is conducive to revolutionary goals, however. Most anarcho-syndicalists would rather someone not work at all, than work as a capitalist or as a police informant, for example. A hatred of work in our current system is understandable; indeed, it is this hatred that fuels the anarcho-syndicalist desire for revolutionary change. This is hatred of work *as it must be conducted in the statist/capitalist system* wherein the mass of people work to enrich a few at the expense of themselves, their talents, and their own self-actualization.

Work in a primitivist society would consist of foraging, hunting, gathering, cooking, seeking or constructing shelter, etc. Just as primitivists claim they would not force anyone to engage in this sort of work, leaving idlers to go it alone or die, so too would anarcho-syndicalists not force anyone to work in a post-capitalist order. But in an anarcho-syndicalist society, surpluses would be more likely to abound, thereby enabling non-workers to be cared for. In the primitivist utopia, surpluses would be *guaranteed* not to exist—indeed, they are posited as authoritarian—leaving many to suffer and die. (Remember, primitivists claim that "the emergence of surplus… *invariably*

[my emphasis] involves property and an end to unconditional sharing"—surpluses are therefore to be avoided, not welcomed.)

Anarcho-syndicalists can also envision a time when work is shorter, more pleasant, more efficient, and more productive than it is now, leaving plenty of time for leisure, if work itself is not counted by workers as being indistinguishable from leisure activity. The primitivist notion, much like the capitalist's, is that people require external compulsion to work. Without such external compulsion, primitivists say, no one would want to work in mines or do other unsavory jobs. Kropotkin addressed this old canard in "Anarchist Communism":

> As to the childish question, repeated for fifty years: "Who would do disagreeable work?" frankly I regret that none of our savants has ever been brought to do it, be it for only one day in his life. If there is still work which is really disagreeable in itself, it is only because our scientific men have never cared to consider the means of rendering it less so: they have always known that there were plenty of starving men who would do it for a few pence a day.

Work can be made more pleasant when the bosses are chased out and when workers themselves administer their workplaces; all resources previously controlled by capitalists would be in the hands of the public. Primitivists who do not wish to work in such a society would not be forced to do so, and it would be up to individual communities to decide whether to give primitive idlers portions of a surplus they did not help produce. (Of course, given that such a society could only occur through a revolution stressing principles of solidarity and mutual aid, it is likely that primitivist non-workers would indeed find themselves supported by their despised workerist cousins.) Until such a state of affairs, however, anarcho-syndicalism places no special blame on people who try to avoid work, unless they do so in a manner that unduly hurts their working class brethren. Anarchists believe that the most important work to be done in the period we are in now is the work of organizing people to overthrow the state-subsidized capitalist system.

Feral Watkins refers to Chaz Bufe's *Listen, Anarchist!* as evidence of how anarchists feel about those who try to avoid work in our society. Bufe mentions that anarchists who intentionally try to get on public assistance as a means of living a work-free, "anarchist" lifestyle are not acting in a manner that is most beneficial for achieving revolutionary change. To primitivists and lifestylists in general, Bufe's comment must come across as a paternalistic admonition of slackers, echoing Republican anti-welfare rhetoric, with its obsessive insistence that people everywhere do the responsible and moral thing of getting a job. In fact, this is the general attitude that primitivists attribute to anarcho-syndicalism and the labor movement as a whole.[1]

Bufe's comments and the anarcho-syndicalist position are not congruent with Watkins' estimation of them, however. In one sense, it is more helpful to anarcho-syndicalist goals for anarchists to have jobs, as they can attempt to organize their place of work along non-hierarchical lines. In this sense, it is helpful for anarchists to go into the workplace much as community organizers go into neighborhoods they wish to organize. The tragedy is, of course, that for most anarchists work is not an organizing choice, but a necessity of life. Radical unions are dependent

[1] Editor's Note: In fact, I see little ethical difference between capitalists who live off the labor of others and welfare-primitivists such as Watkins/Faun who likewise deliberately live off stolen [by the government] labor. The money they receive doesn't fall off trees—it's taken from the pay of those who work. I consider both parasites, and worse, parasites who spit on those whose labor they live off. —CB

upon workers organizing within their industry for the eventual expropriation of capital from private hands.

The desire by some lumpenproles to scam their way onto the welfare rolls also represents a type of escapism. No one is saying that what small, paltry welfare programs exist in the US should be destroyed, or anything like that (quite the contrary). But carving out an individual, work-free lifestyle is not revolutionary, nor will it lead to any substantial revolutionary change. Bosses can live with workers dropping out of the rat race; they cannot live with workers actively organizing on the shop floor. Indeed, the great anarchist revolutions of Spain, the Ukraine, Mexico, and elsewhere, were not guided by some rousing vision of dropping out of the rat race. Welfare escapism is.

"The only real problem they have with the capitalist system is who's in charge," Feral Faun continues, referring to anarcho-syndicalists. Zerzan agrees, writing, "Self-managed factories and other forms of productionism and specialization are now widely understood as no advance at all." ("Widely understood"? By whom?) Anarcho-syndicalists would "prefer the One Big Capitalist," Faun writes, "the international union of working people, rather than various individuals, corporations and states to be in charge. But the basic structure would be the same."

Here Faun/Watkins mocks the I.W.W. and its and its notion of the "One Big Union." But when Faun scoffs at the "international union of working people" he also denigrates global working class unity itself! Indeed, Faun's analysis is not "workerist" at all. Far from it. It is, in fact, anti-worker. The fear of the "one big capitalist" is exactly the anarchist critique of Leninism and other forms of statist socialism. That is, statist socialists seek to replace a number of capitalists with one large capitalist in the form of the state. But anarcho-syndicalists want neither one big capitalist (the state) or many capitalists to choose from: they want a self-managed economy where the people doing the actual work are calling the shots. That is not capitalism, let alone something that is conducive to the formation of "One Big Capitalist." Feral Watkins' insistence that it somehow is only reinforces the fact that he and other primitivists have no understanding of the basic social dynamic that underpins capitalism.

"[T]he bourgeois liberal is content to get rid of priests and kings, and the anarcho-syndicalist throws in presidents and bosses," Faun says. "But the factories remain intact, the stores remain intact (though the syndicalists may call them distribution centers), the family remains intact—the entire social system remains intact."

And would families not remain intact if primitivists had their way? Faun's insistence is that since physical structures, like stores, remain standing, somehow oppressive social relations must exist as well. Like Karl Marx's flawed belief that the "steam mill gives you the industrial capitalist," Faun believes that the store will give you the boss. That is, the physical existence of buildings somehow brings about authority figures. Faun does not trouble us with an explanation of how this is so—he leaves us to take it on his good word.

In fact, whether or not the stores remain intact would be the prerogative of workers and their communities. When Faun posits that anarcho-syndicalists want things to continue the same as before, but simply self-managed, he betrays a deep misunderstanding of the principle of self-management, as does Perlman, above. Anarcho-syndicalism is the belief that workers know best about how their labor is to be used—if at all—and that they, and not theorists, should decide what to do at the actual point of production.

And, believe it or not, anarcho-syndicalists do not wish to deprive primitivists of any opportunity to get back to nature. If, in a post-revolutionary society, groups of primitivists wanted to

leave and lead a lifestyle they'd consider more attuned to man's natural inclinations, they would certainly be free to do so. As they'd look in disdain over their shoulders at the "workerist" anarchist civilization they have left, they could delight in pursuing the very hard work of foraging and constructing shelter for themselves, deluding themselves that that is not itself work—albeit a hard sort of work not aided by the machinery that anarchists back in the hi-tech society have expropriated from capitalist rule. In the end, the primitivist will be working much harder than his "workerist" cousin, no matter how hard he may try to convince himself that he has liberated himself from toil.

## 6. The Bloody Side of Primitivism

Simple theoretical ineptitude is one thing. But there is also a far darker side to primitive thought.

On December 11, 1985, California store owner Hugh Scrutton tried to remove what he thought was a road hazard from his store's parking lot. As he picked up the object, which resembled a piece of wood with nails driven through it, an explosion drove metal shards into his heart and ripped off his right hand, killing him. Scrutton was the first of three victims to die from Unabomber attacks.

"They ain't innocent," Zerzan told a reporter. "Which isn't to say that I'm totally at ease with blowing them to pieces. Part of me is. And part of me isn't." In *Running on Emptiness*, Zerzan evinces his sympathy differently: "I offered the hope, if not the prediction, that TK [Ted Kaczynski] might at some point also be considered in a more positive light for his resistance to industrial civilization." Kaczynski, Zerzan claims, "decided he had to kill people to bring up this suppressed point of view. And he forced them [the media] to publish it. The point here is not whether he was justified or not, but merely the level of denial [that culture and technology are bad.]"

According to Kaczynski at primitivism.com, "When things break down, there is going to be violence and this does raise a question. I don't know if I exactly want to call it a moral question, but the point is that for those who realize the need to do away with the techno-industrial system, if you work for its collapse, in effect you are killing a lot of people." In the article "When Non-Violence is Suicide," Kaczynski urges activists to prepare for combat, painting a hypothetical scenario to compel us towards this end: In Kaczynski-Land, the parable goes, post-revolutionary farmers (i.e., crop-domesticators) are confronted by marauders, who wish to rape a primitivists' female friend. "Mick, grab that bitch over there before she gets away. She got [sic] a nice ass," Kaczynski has the imaginary bandits saying. "We'll all screw her tonight." Lovely stuff.

In *A:AJODA*, which published Kaczynski's first prison interview, Lawrence Jarach complains, "There are many prejudiced caricatures and objections concerning primitivism; for example that its proponents want to 'go back to the Stone Age'…." In fact, Jarach says, "[a]s far as I can tell, most primitivists only want to go back as far as the Iron Age," putting the primitivist golden era at around 1000 B.C.E., well after the establishment of the written word and crop surpluses, and when Middle Eastern kingdoms held sway. According to the non-partisan Population Resource Bureau, "Estimates of average life expectancy in Iron Age France have been put at only 10 or 12 years. Under these conditions, the birth rate would have to be about 80 per 1,000 people just for the species to survive." That's some Golden Age.

Jarach delineates a depressingly diverse number of primitivist theories currently in circulation: some are associated with Zerzan and "green anarchism"; another revolves around the misanthropy of Earth First!-style Deep Ecology[2]; and yet at least one more comes from the Perlman/Bradford/*Fifth Estate* sector. Jarach says the criticism that constructing a primitivist society "would result in an immediate mass die-off of thousands—if not millions—of humans" is a mere "dismissal" from those who do not want to spend time trying to understand the many forms of primitivism he has laid out for us. Jarach then asks Zerzan if, in fact, "millions will die immediately" if primitivists had their way. "Perhaps the key word in your question is 'immediately,'" Zerzan carefully responds. "In other words, if the whole prevailing apparatus vanished instantly somehow, millions probably would die." The solution is apparently to slowly dismantle technology—something that would not bring about mass death *immediately*, it is true, but gradually. The rest of Zerzan's answer is a non-answer. ("People are already dying," he says—a fact known to most, and in fact the reason many of us are anarchists, as we wish to prevent widespread death!)

Tragically, the most fanatic segments of the primitivist movement welcome human death. Though they do not practice Kaczynski-style homicide in mass numbers, they thrill at large-scale epidemics that might reduce the population of the earth. In a May 1, 1987 edition of the Earth First! paper, for example, "Miss Ann Thropy" argued that AIDS is a "good" thing, and said that if that "epidemic didn't exist, radical environmentalists would have to invent one."

That a hunter-gatherer or even an Iron Age society could not support massive population centers is a fact recognized by most primitivists. To achieve their objective of a primitive society, therefore, like the Khmer Rouge, they hold that the population must be more evenly distributed across the earth. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, revolutionaries should work to establish a "gradual abolition of the distinction of town and country, by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country."[3] Marxist-style population dispersal advocated by "post-left" thinkers is an odd thing indeed, not to mention an old thing—a prime example of their borrowing from past authoritarians.

In "Notes on Primitivism," Zerzan and the Green Anarchy Collective repeat deep ecologist-style warnings that within "the last 200 years the human population growth curve has shifted from the normal mammal 's' shape to the more viral 'j' shape." The association of humanity with a "viral" infection is common to deep ecology, which regards humanity as a disease upon the planet. (To wit: Earth First! co-founder David Foreman's statement "We are a cancer on nature.") Playing with the analogy further, the primitivists warn that "this increase is much like that of viruses (which is to consume the host until both the virus and the host are dead)."

Wisely, primitivists usually stop short of actually advocating mass killing, even if individual primitivists like Ted Kaczynski have already attempted it. "[W]e aren't suggesting a strategy to deal with this [population growth]," the Green Anarchy Collective wisely adds. "[W]e just think there is data about the situation that should be known"—presumably so that others, too, may ruminate and also not suggest a strategy to deal with it.

In his "Primitive Thought" supplement to *Listen, Anarchist!* Chaz Bufe says that the idea that "population lies at the root of every environmental problem" is on "a par with the simplistic belief

[2] Many, probably most, Earth Firsters have abandoned the misanthropic "deep ecology" views expounded by Earth First! co-founder, "Republican environmentalist" Dave Foreman, in the 1980s.

[3] Point 9 of the 10-point program recorded at the end of Section 2 of the Manifesto.

that 'technology' is the sole cause of environmental destruction." The Malthusian doctrine that asserts population growth will, at some point in the future, outstrip available resources has been used to justify the most callous government policies against the poor. Better to let people die off if they will be a burden on the planet or others, the logic goes. In fact, if the global population is increasing at an alarming rate, we already know several of the reasons why this is so: 1) Religious authoritarianism that urges people in poorer countries to marry young and be fruitful, and to avoid sinful contraceptives. 2) Right-wing policy makers that outlaw abortion (even though, for the poor, there is always a de facto ban on expensive abortion procedures), "morning after"-type abortion pills, and sex education in schools. 3) Destructive neoliberal globalization policies that keep the third world in poverty, leading families to produce more offspring so that they may gain more income-earners for their household. Malthus' notion that there is a "surplus population" sadly merits a reminder that there is no human being that is surplus to his or her family, or to the human project. It is disappointing that some have to be reminded that no human being is superfluous.

If a primitive life is so desirable, be it of a Stone Age or Iron Age type, then why haven't primitivists attempted to live this way? In fact, the failure of primitivists to pursue the establishment of hunter-gatherer societies reveals how clearly undesirable many primitivists really feel such societies are. "Does Zerzan live like that?" Peter Fenton asked in a 1999 issue of *Scope* magazine. "No way. 'It's too daunting a task,' he admits." Likewise, some primitivists live off public assistance and/or the generosity of friends, never attempting a break with civilized comforts.

Unlike anarcho-syndicalists or anarcho-communists, primitivists *could* attempt to live their preferred lifestyle in our world now. Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* presents academician Gene Rosellini's attempt to live a primitive lifestyle in the wilds of Canada. "I was interested in knowing if it was possible to be independent of modern technology," he told *Anchorage Daily News* reporter Debra McKinney. "I began my adult life with the hypothesis that it would be possible to become a Stone Age native." He "purged his life of all but the most primitive tools, which he fashioned from native materials with his own hands," Krakauer writes. For ten years, Rossellini toughed it out. Eventually, however, he gave up: "I would say I realistically experienced the physical, mental and emotional reality of the Stone Age. But to borrow a Buddhist phrase, eventually came a setting face-to-face with pure reality. I learned that it is not possible for human beings as we know them to live off the land." In 1991, Rosellini was found dead in his shack, a suicide victim.

Ted Kaczynski's attempt at primitive living is well known, as well. Kaczynski's situation, however, presents the reality that many primitivists are in fact *not* content simply to live in isolation, but seek to strike out at the civilization that is around them. Primitivists claim that "techno-industrial civilization" would inevitably encroach on their enclaves due to its ceaseless, internal drive to expand outward. This is why primitivists do not want anarcho-syndicalists or others to enjoy a high-tech society—their contention is that if *any* remnants of "techno-industrial civilization" remain—even if it is in anarchist hands—they and the Earth will still be threatened. Again, primitivists ascribe "techno-industrialism" a will of its own, proclaiming its ability to do things independent of human agency (see the "Frankenstein monster" and "Earthwrecker" comment made by primitivists cited [in chapter 3]). Latent in this assertion is also the unproven belief that "techno-industrial society" would always be ecologically unsustainable. This is the logic that impels primitivists to strike out violently against those they see as "technologism's" advocates. In

the primitive mindset, such people literally threaten their lives; therefore, killing them is a type of self-defense.

Interestingly, primitivists have also worked it out to have things both ways. On the one hand, some say "it will do no good" to leave civilization at this point, because civilization would eventually encroach upon them. This provides them carte blanche to enjoy the Internet, microwaved food, cell phones, and medical care. But at the same time they ruminate on how much better life would be without such amenities. Again, it seems primitivists want everyone else to go primitive first. The notion that "there is no place to go now that is free of civilization" provides an excuse to indulge in hi-tech gadgets and other luxuries until "society breaks down." Like Marxist determinists, primitivists seem to believe that sooner or later society will crash under its own weight, with or without them, so there's no harm in indulging themselves in its pleasures in the meantime.

However, one is led to a bloody conclusion once one adopts the flawed premises of primitive thought. In conflating "industrialism" or "techno-industrial civilization" with the market forces of capitalism, primitivists insist it is a matter of ecological survival to destroy all machinery, whether humans require it for life (as in medical care or water purification devices) or not. For primitivists, elimination of capitalist profit motives still leaves the Frankenstein monster of technology unharmed; they preach that the monster will continue to grow blindly, like a cancer, even if no capitalists control it. In the end, the primitivist imperative is an all-out war not so much against coercive social relations, as anarchism is, as against physical structures that they say have their own prerogatives. Replacing authoritarian social relations with egalitarian social relations will do no good, they believe; physical infrastructure must be ruined as well. This is a major part of their broader aim of destroying all civilization.

In contrast, let us as anarchists propose the establishment of a civilization worthy of the name. As Kropotkin once noted, "Competition is the law of the jungle, but cooperation is the law of civilization." We should seek to establish a society and culture that is, in every sense of the word, *civilized*. Statist capitalism provides no civility for billions the world over. Wars, poverty, the eradication of native peoples, unjust distribution of workers' produce, debt bondage, and crime—this is the legacy of our authoritarian era. Instead, anarchists should work to create a society that replaces such widespread incivility with a world that is thoroughly, and to every degree, *civil*.

## 7. Appendix: On Decoding Primitivist Babble

**Notes on the Conflations of Primitive Thought (A Guide to Decoding Primitivist Babble)**

### Conflation of Civilization and Coercive Social Relations

"Civilization is the fountainhead of all dominations: patriarchy, division of labor, domestication of life, warfare, on down the line to its present ghastly fullness," Zerzan, Blair, and the Green Anarchy Collective assert.

In fact, patriarchy, warfare, and forms of division of labor existed before civilization—not to mention irrational page/religious thought. See Keeley's *War Before Civilization*, for example, or anthropologist Robert B. Edgerton's *Sick Societies*.

## Conflation of Technology and Coercive Social Relations

"Technology is more of a process or concept than a static form. It is a complex system involving division of labor, resource extraction, and exploitation for the benefit of those who implement its process," Zerzan, Blair, and the Green Anarchy Collective inform us.

This view was addressed earlier. Needless to say, the primitive view that technology constitutes an array of coercive relations is not shared by anthropologists, who define technology as the application of science or technical methods to problem-solving. That is not to say that coercive relations involving the use of technology don't exist, only that technology isn't the source of them. Humans are. The onus is on primitivists to demonstrate that technology is *invariably* predicated on coercive or environmentally hostile relations.

## Conflation of "Industrialism" and Capitalism

Primitivists generally ascribe to their concept of "industrialism" all the features of statist capitalism—but additionally (and incredibly) attribute to it a sovereign will, suggesting that it acts independent of human control. The "industrial system" would work to destroy humanity and the earth even if it were the collective property of an anarchist society ("self-managed"), in their view.

## Conflation of Poverty and Freedom

Primitivists wish humanity to live like earlier hominids—that is, in poverty, by today's standards. They confer praise on those who live "down-shifted" lifestyles (much like Kalle Lasn and his *Adbusters* troupe) and approve of those who choose to become squatters and dumpster-divers. They dispute the notion that primitive living amounts to a poverty lifestyle because, they claim, early hominids enjoyed a type of "primitive affluence" (in radically different conditions than our own, of course).

This brings to mind a *Saturday Night Live* sketch in which comedian Jon Lovitz complained that he couldn't get a date, whereupon he turned to the camera and urged women, "Lower your standards!" That is what primitivists urge for the rest of us—not just for the super rich, mind you, but for modest working class families. Traditionally, of course, anarchists have sought a collective *raising* of living standards, with redistribution from the rich downward to the rest of us.

Radically reducing living standards to meet a primitivist notion of "affluence" seems Orwellian. While it is true that some non-industrial peoples, such as the Chumash Indians of California, were lucky enough to happen upon a naturally abundant environment (whereupon they ceased to be hunter-gatherers, settled, and began crop-domestication), other pre-civilized peoples did not fare so well, and roamed endlessly in search of food, driven by a base need for survival. That *all* primitive peoples for over two million years enjoyed "affluence" is not only wildly speculative, it plainly contradicts anthropological knowledge.

### Conflation of Group Decision Making and Statecraft

Primitivists and post-leftist allies (note: not all post-leftists are primitivists) often sneer at anything "organizational." They falsely associate decision making structures of groups with the running of the state, often conflating, for example, union democracy with statecraft.

This ignores the essence of the state: coercion and violence. Anarchists argue that organization is essential to social survival, but that coercion and violence are not, and that organizations can and do exist that are not coercive or authoritarian. Primitivists ignore this essential distinction and argue that *all* organizations are authoritarian, thought they're hard put to say why. Thus, by their own logic, the *Green Anarchy* and *Fifth Estate* collectives are statist and authoritarian and should be disbanded. Why they have thus far not followed their own logic is a mystery.

### Conflation of Organization and Authoritarians (or "Leninism")

Statist capitalists have often said that "anarchist organization" is an oxymoron. Statists are unable to imagine any type of organization that is not authoritarian, steeped as they are in authoritarian ideas about how groups must be run. Amazingly, many primitivists agree, and so hope to do away with organization! Echoing the worst of post-leftist rhetoric, some primitivists have incredibly suggested that no institution should be allowed to exist for more than a decade or so, even if members of the institution democratically decide they'd like the operation to continue (and even if the rest of the community has no problem with the institution continuing). A collectively run farm would in this case have to be shut down after several years, lest it become an evil "entrenched institution"—even if the community and farm workers objected.

It's also worth mentioning that primitivists routinely ignore the well known distinguishing characteristics of Leninism (vanguard parties, retention of the government in the form of a "workers' state," a controlling party central committee, government control of all aspects of life, especially work life, etc., etc.) and throw the term around merely as a form of abuse, as a form of name calling, much in the manner of right-wingers who label anyone who disagrees with them as a "communist."

### Conflation of Unions per se with "Mediating Structures of Oppression"

A common primitivist canard is that *all* unions are simply mediating structures of exploitation ("the left-wing of capital") between bosses and wage slaves. This notion owes much to postmodern theory, which asserts that any social relation arising in a hegemonic system is automatically "tainted" by virtue of its birth there. That is, anything brought about in an oppressive society will be oppressive, no matter what its actual character is. Some radical Maoists have extended this to include sexual relations between men and women. (All sex is exploitative of women in capitalism, they say, no matter what.) In fact, there is much truth to the notion that capitalism (or any authoritarian system) skews relations between human beings. But the idea that all groups in capitalism "mediate" capitalist oppression would have to apply to primitivist groups as well. Eventually, one ends up with a pessimistic picture in which *every* progressive organization is innately oppressive, thereby eliminating hope for meaningful social change!

Of course, I'm not denying the fact that business unions of the AFL-CIO variety often act in ways that are extremely detrimental to workers. The labor aristocracy of the AFL-CIO does tend to create a caste of officers who live at the expense of dues-paying workers, and who develop

class interests in opposition to them. But this does not mean *all* forms of working class mutual aid in the workplace merely "mediate" exploitation! Radically democratic unions are possible, as the IWW, early CIO, CNT, and many independent unions have shown.

Even the primitivists who concede that some types of unions are revolutionary (and they usually concede this only when they're absolutely pressed) are rarely to be found actually supporting such unions or organizing for them. Most primitivists instead choose a "zero-work" attitude and leave labor organizing to others.

## Conflation of Economics and Competition

> "It seems evident that industrialization and the factories could not be gotten rid of instantly, but equally clear that their liquidation must be pursued with all the vigor behind the rush of break-out. Such enslavement of people and nature must disappear forever, so that words like production and economy will have no meaning."
>
> —John Zerzan, "On the Transition—Postscript to *Future Primitive*."

Even hunter-gatherer social groups had economic systems—that is, systems of production and distribution. They produced tools and weapons, and distributed the foods they gathered or killed. There is in fact an implied primitivist type of economy in all primitivist works, whether they choose to acknowledge this or not. Fredy Perlman, for example, refers to Marshall Sahlins' "Stone Age Economics." Economics will continue to exist as long as human beings exist.

In the end, the question boils down to what *kind* of economy we want—one that's controlled by those spending their work lives in it, or one controlled by insatiable parasites (capitalists).

Likewise, the question that we as anarchists are faced with is what *kind* of anarchist movement we want—one that looks often-ugly, authoritarian social reality in the eye, with the aim of transforming it into something better, something that will result in freer, happier lives for ourselves and all of our brothers and sisters on planet Earth, or one that wastes its time fantasizing about a non-existent Golden Age, and that would result in the deaths of billions if its precepts were followed.

The choice is ours.

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Brian Oliver Sheppard
Anarchism vs. Primitivism
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