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Beyond Civilized and Primitive

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Western industrial society tells a story about itself that goes like this: "A long time ago, our ancestors were 'primitive'. They lived in caves, were stupid, hit each other with clubs, and had short, stressful lives in which they were constantly on the verge of starving or being eaten by saber-toothed cats. Then we invented 'civilization', in which we started growing food, being nice to each other, getting smarter, inventing marvelous technologies, and everywhere replacing chaos with order. It's getting better all the time and will continue forever."

Western industrial society is now in decline, and in declining societies it's normal for people to feel that their whole existence is empty and meaningless, that the system is rotten to its roots and should all be torn up and thrown out. It's also normal for people to frame this rejection in whatever terms their society has given them. So we reason: "This world is hell, this world is civilization, so civilization is hell, so maybe primitive life was heaven. Maybe the whole story is upside-down!"

We examine the dominant story and find that although it contains some truth, it depends on assumptions and distortions and omissions, and it was not designed to reveal truth, but to influence

the values and behaviors of the people who heard it. Seeking balance, we create a perfect mirror image:

"A long time ago, our ancestors were 'primitive'. They were just as smart as we would be if we didn't watch television, and they lived in cozy hand-made shelters, were generally peaceful and egalitarian, and had long healthy lives in which food was plentiful because they kept their populations well below the carrying capacity of their landbase. Then someone invented 'civilization', in which we monopolized the land and grew our population by eating grain. Grain is high in calories but low in other nutrients, so we got sick, and we also began starving when the population outgrew the landbase, so the farmers conquered land from neighboring foragers and enslaved them to cut down more forests and grow more grain, and to build sterile monuments while the elite developed technologies of repression and disconnection and gluttonous consumption, and everywhere life was replaced with control. It's been getting worse and worse, and soon we will abandon it and live the way we did before."

Again, this story contains truth, but it depends on assumptions and distortions and omissions, and it is designed to influence the values and behaviors of the people who hear it. Certainly it's extremely compelling. As a guiding ideology, as a utopian vision, primitivism can destroy Marxism or libertarianism because it digs deeper and overthrows their foundations. It defeats the old religions on evidence. And best of all, it presents a utopia that is not in the realm of imagination or metaphysics, but has actually happened. We can look at archaeology and anthropology and history and say: "Here's a forager-hunter society where people were strong and long-lived. Here's a tribe where the 'work' is so enjoyable that they don't even have the concept of 'freeloading'. Here are European explorers writing that certain tribes showed no trace of violence or meanness."

But this strength is also a weakness, because reality cuts both ways. As soon as you say, "We should live like these actual people,"

the industrial age's boundless optimism about machines, or it looks at the present by exploring the unintended consequences of high tech. Cyberpunk is better — if you put a 1950's version of the year 2000 through a cyberpunk filter, you would be close to the real 2000. The key insight of cyberpunk is that more technology doesn't make things cleaner — it makes things dirtier.

Fantasy, while seeming to look at the past, might be seeing the future: elves and wizards could represent the increasing diversity of post-humans, and "magic" is what we in the industrial age dimly perceive as the world outside our objective materialist philosophy. I think steampunk does the best of all, if you factor out the Victorian frippery. Like cyberpunk, it shows a human-made world that's as messy and alive as nature, but the technological system is a crazy hybrid of everything from "stone age" to "space age" — rejecting the idea that we are locked into ages.

Primitive people see time as a circle. Civilized people see it as a line. We are about to see it as an open plain where we can wander at will. History is broken. Go!

every competing ideologue will jump up with examples of those people living dreadfully: "Here's a tribe with murderous warfare, and one with ritual abuse, and one with chronic disease from malnutrition, and one where people are just mean and unhappy, and here are a bunch of species extinctions right when primitive humans appeared."

Most primitivists accept this evidence, and have worked out several ways to deal with it. One move is to postulate something that has not been observed, but if it were, would make the facts fit your theory. Specifically, they say "The nasty tribes must have all been corrupted by exposure to civilization." Another move is to defend absolutely everything on the grounds of cultural relativism: "Who are we to say it's wrong to hit another person in the head with an axe?" Another move is to say, "Okay, some of that stuff is bad, but if you add up all the bad and good, primitive life is still preferable to civilization."

This is hardly inspiring, and it still has to be constantly defended, and not from a strong position, because we know very little about prehistoric life. We know what tools people used, and what they ate, but we don't know how many tribes were peaceful or warlike, how many were permissive or repressive, how many were egalitarian or authoritarian, and we have no idea what was going on in their heads. One of the assumptions I mentioned above, made by both primitivism and the dominant story, is that stone age people were the same as tribal forager-hunters observed in historical times. After all, we call them both "primitive". But in terms of culture, and even consciousness, they might be profoundly different.

A more reasonable move is to abandon primitive life as an ideal, or a goal, and instead just set it up as a perspective: "Hey, if I stand here, I can see that my own world, which I thought was normal, is totally insane!" Or we can set it up as a source of learning: "Look at this one thing these people did, so let's see if we can do it too." Then it doesn't matter how many flaws they had. And once we give up the framework that shows a right way and a wrong way, and

a clear line between them, we can use perspectives and ideas from people formerly on the "wrong" side: "Ancient Greeks went barefoot everywhere and treated their slaves with more humanity than Wal-Mart treats its workers. Medieval serfs worked fewer hours than modern Americans, and thought it was degrading to work for wages. Slum-dwellers in Mumbai spend less time and effort getting around on foot than Americans spend getting around in cars. The online file sharing community is building a gift economy."

Identifying with stone age people is like taking a big stretch. Then if we relax, we find that a lot of smaller stretches are effortless, that we can easily take all kinds of perspectives outside the assumptions of our little bubble. We could even re-invent "primitivism" to ignore stone age people and include only recent tribes who we have good information about, and who still stack up pretty well against our own society. We could call this *historical primitivism*, and a few primitivists have taken this position. The reason most don't is, first, our lack of knowledge about prehistory forms a convenient blank screen on which anyone can project visions to back up their ideology. And second, stone age primitivism comes with an extremely powerful idea, which I call the *timeline argument*.

The timeline argument convinces us that a better way of life is the human default, that all the things we hate are like scratches in the sand that will be washed away when the tide comes in. Often it's phrased as 99%; of human history has been that, and only 1%; has been this." Sometimes it's illustrated with a basketball court metaphor: It's 94 feet long, and if you call each foot ten thousand years, then we had fire and stone tools for 93 feet, agriculture for one foot, and industrial society for around a quarter of an inch.

The key word in this argument is "we". Where do you draw the line between "us" and "not us"? Why not go back a billion years, and say that "we" were cell colonies in the primordial oceans? Call a billion years a football field, and the age of agriculture can dance on the head of a pin! This would seem to be a much stronger argument, and yet I've never seen a primitivist draw the line even as far back

which according to the myth of "progress" is inevitable. I think if we do get a technological transcendence, it's going to involve machines *changing* humans. My favorite scenario is time-contracted virtual reality: suppose you can go into an artificial world, have the experience of spending a week there, and come back and only a day has passed, or an hour, or a minute. If we can do that, all bets are off!

The biggest weakness in my vision is that innovation can go with stability, that we can continue exploring and trying new things without repeatedly destabilizing ourselves by extending our power beyond our understanding. Maybe we're just going to keep making mistakes and falling down forever, and in that case the best we can do is minimize the severity of the falls. I think we're doing a pretty good job so far in the present collapse. Even in America, we might escape with no more than a long depression, a mild fall in population, and a much-needed shakeout of technology and economics. Life will get more painful but also more meaningful, as billions of human-hours shift from processing paperwork and watching TV to intensive learning of new skills to keep ourselves alive. These skills will run the whole range, from tracking deer to growing potatoes to fixing bicycles to building solar-powered wi-fi networks — to new things we won't even imagine until we have our backs to the wall.

Humans are the most mentally adaptable species on Earth, and not bad at physical adaptation. Our species can easily survive the worst-case scenarios for climate change and industrial collapse. If we go extinct, it will be through self-transformation. We might use biotech to genetically change ourselves into something that's not robust, or use information technology to get so good at entertaining ourselves that we're no longer interested in reproduction. Or we might spin off many cultures and subspecies that go extinct, while a few survive.

I think we can see the future in popular fiction, but not the fiction we think. Most science fiction is either stuck in the recent past, in

of human enthusiasm channeled into a massive cooperative effort. But then, as we've seen in pretty much every large system in history, this pattern of human action hardened, leaders became rulers, inspired actions became chores, and workers became slaves.

To achieve stability, and freedom, and ecological responsibility, we must learn to halt the slide from life into control, to maintain the bottom-up energy structure permanently, even in large complex systems. I don't know how we're going to do this. It's even hard for individuals to do it — look at all the creative people who make one masterpiece and spend the rest of their life making crappy derivative works. The best plan I can think of is to build our system out of cells of less than 150 people,[4] roughly the number at which cooperation tends to give way to hierarchy, and even then to expect cells to go bad, and have built-in pathways for dead cells to be broken down and new ones to form and individuals to move from cell to cell. Basically, we'd be making a big system that's like a living body, where all past big systems have been animated corpses.

Assuming that our descendants do achieve stability, what technological level will they be at? I want to leave this one wide open. It's possible in theory for us to go even farther "back" than the stone age. I call this the *Land Dolphins* scenario — that we somehow transform ourselves into super-intelligent creatures who don't use any physical tools at all. At the other extreme, I'm not ruling out space colonies, although the worst mistake we could make would be expanding into space before we have learned stability on our home planet. I think physical travel to other solar systems is out of the question — long before mechanistic technology gets that far, we will have moved to new paradigms that offer much easier ways to get to new worlds.

The "singularity" theory is also off the mark. Techies think machines will surpass humans, because they think we're nothing but machines ourselves, so all we need to do is make better machines,

[4] en.wikipedia.org

as *Homo habilis* two million years ago — or as recently as *Homo sapiens sapiens* 130,000 years ago. Why not?

This is a difficult and important question, and it took me days to puzzle it out. I think we've been confusing two separate issues. One is a fact, that the present way we live is a deviation from the way of other biological life. If this is our point, then a million year timeline is much too short — we should go back at least a thousand times farther!

The other issue is a question: *Who are we?* When you get below the level of culture, down to the level of biology or spirit, what is normal for us to do? What is possible? What is right?

If you're talking about who we are, then the million year timeline is much too long. The mistake happens like this: "We are human, and we can plausibly call *Homo erectus* human. Therefore our nature is to live like *Homo erectus*, and the way we live now is not our tendency, not our normal behavior, but some kind of bizarre accident. What a relief! We can just bring down civilization, and we'll naturally go back to living like *Homo erectus*, but since we don't know exactly how they lived, we'll assume it's like the best recent forager-hunter tribes."

Now, I'm not disputing that many societies have lived close to the Earth with a quality of life that we can't imagine. Richard Sorenson mentions several, and explores one in depth, in his essay on Preconquest Consciousness.[1] What I'm disputing is: 1) that we have any evidence that prehistoric people had that consciousness; 2) that that consciousness is our default state; 3) that it is simple for us to get back there; and 4) that large-scale technologically complex societies are a deviation from who we are.

Who we are is changing all the time, and new genetic research has revealed shockingly fast change in just the last few thousand years, including malaria resistance, adult milk digestion, and blue eyes. According to anthropologist John Hawks, *"We are more dif-*

[1] www.danbartlett.co.uk

ferent genetically from people living 5000 years ago than they were from Neanderthals."[2]

Now, you could argue that some of these changes are not really who we are, because they were caused by civilization: without domesticating cows and goats, we would not have evolved milk digestion. By the same logic, without inventing clothing, we would not have evolved hairless bodies. Without crawling onto dry land, we would not have evolved legs.

My point is, there is no place you can stick a pin and say "this is our nature", because our nature is not a location — it is a journey. We crawled onto dry land; we became warm-blooded and grew hair; we moved from the forests to the plains; we walked upright; we tamed fire and began cooking food; we invented symbolic language; our brains got bigger; our tools got more complex; we invented grain agriculture and empires and airplanes and ice cream and nuclear weapons.

This isn't quite fair, because all of us adopted fire, but not all of us adopted grain agriculture, and riding in airplanes is much easier to reverse than walking upright. It's more likely that some of our descendants will be using fire and stone tools, than that some of them will be using Prozac and silicon microprocessors. But I still don't think, as some primitivists do, that civilization is a dead end, or an unlikely accident.

If civilization is a fluke, we would expect to see it begin only once, and spread from there. But instead we see grain farming and explosions of human social complexity in several places at about the same time: along the Tigris and Euphrates, and also in Africa, India, and China. You could still argue that those changes spread by travel, that there was one accident and then some far-flung colonies — unless we found an early civilization so remote that travel was out of the question.

[2] www.smh.com.au

This is a general problem of top-down systems: for both technical and psychological reasons, it's easy to add control mechanisms and hard to remove them, easy to squeeze tighter and hard to let go. As the controllers get more selfish and insulated, and the controlled get more frustrated and depressed, and more energy is wasted on forcing people to do what they wouldn't do without force, the whole system seizes up, and can only be renewed by a surge of transforming energy from below. This transformation could be peaceful, but often the ruling interests block it until it builds up such pressure that it explodes violently.

The same way the ruling interests become corrupt through an exploitative relationship with the people, we all become corrupt when we participate in a society that exploits the life around it. When we talk about "nature", we don't mean wheat fields or zoo animals — we mean plants that scatter seeds to the wind and animals that roam at will. We mean raw aliveness, and we can't repress it outside ourselves without also repressing it inside ourselves. The spirit that guides our shoe when it crushes grass coming through cracks in the driveway, also guides us to crush feelings and perceptions coming through cracks in our paved minds, and we need these feelings and perceptions to make good decisions, to be sane.

If primitive life seems better to us, it's because it's easier for smaller and simpler societies to avoid falling into domination. In the best tribes, the "chief" just tells people to do what they want to do anyway, and a good chief will channel this energy into a harmonious whole. But the bigger a system gets, and the longer a big system lasts, the more challenging it is to maintain a bottom-up energy structure.

I have a wild speculation about the origin of complex societies. The Great Pyramid of Giza is superior in every way to the two pyramids next to it — yet the Great Pyramid was the *first* of the three to be built. It's like Egyptian civilization appeared out of nowhere at full strength, and immediately began declining. My thought is: the first pyramid was not built by slaves. It was built by an explosion

in "What Does It Mean to Be Human?"

> Even if the social order can do everything to man — starve him, torture him, imprison him, or over feed him — this cannot be done without certain consequences which follow from the very conditions of human existence. Man, if utterly deprived of all stimuli and pleasure, will be incapable of performing work, certainly any skilled work. If he is not that utterly destitute, he will tend to rebel if you make him a slave; he will tend to be violent if life is too boring; he will tend to lose all creativity if you make him into a machine. Man in this respect is not different from animals or from inanimate matter. You can get certain animals into the zoo, but they will not reproduce, and others will become violent although they are not violent in freedom… If man were infinitely malleable, there would have been no revolutions.

In *1491*, Mann writes that on Pizarro's march to conquer the Incas, he was actively helped by local populations who were sick of the empire's oppression. Fredy Perlman's book goes through the whole history of western civilization arguing for the human dissatisfaction factor in every failed society. And it's clear to me and many other Americans that our empire is falling because nobody believes in it — not the soldiers, who quickly learn that war is bullshit, not the corporate executives, who at best are focused on short term profits and at worst are just thieves, not the politicians, who are cynically doing whatever it takes to maximize campaign contributions, and not the people who actually do the work, most of whom are just going through the motions.

Also, America (with other nations close behind) is getting more tightly controlled, and thus more unbearable for its participants.

That civilization has been found. Archaeologists call it the Norte Chico, in present-day Peru. From 3000–1800 BC, they built at least 25 cities, and they had giant stone monuments earlier than anyone except the Mesopotamians. Even more shocking, their system was not based on grain! All previous models of civilization have put grain agriculture at the very root: once you had grain farming, you had a denser, more settled population, which led to a more complex society, and also you had a storable commodity that enabled hierarchy.

The Norte Chicans ate only small amounts of grain, but they did have a storable commodity that enabled hierarchy, something that allowed small differences in wealth to feed back into large differences, and ultimately entrenched elites commanding slaves to build monolithic architcture. It was cotton! So we have people on opposite sides of the world, in different geographies, using different materials, falling into the same pattern, but that pattern is not about food. It seems to be about economics, or more precisely, about human cognition. After thousands of generations of slow change, human intelligence reached a tipping point that permitted large complex societies to appear in radically different circumstances.

Now it's tempting to call "civilization" the new human default, but of course, in many places, these societies did not appear. Also, they all collapsed! And then new ones appeared, and those collapsed. I don't think it even makes sense to talk about a human default, any more than it makes sense to talk about a default state for the weather. But the range in which we move has widened.

My information on the Norte Chico comes from Charles C. Mann's book *1491*, a survey of recent findings about the Americas before the European conquest. Mann is neither a primitivist nor an advocate for western civilization, but an advocate for, well, *far* western civilization, which was a lot more like western civilization than we thought. At its peak, the Inca empire was the largest in the world, with exploited colonies, massive forced resettling of workers, and bloody power struggles among the elite just

like in Europe and Asia. The Maya deforested the Yucatan and depleted its topsoil only a few centuries after the Romans did the same thing around the Mediterranean. Aztec "human sacrifice" was surprisingly similar to English "public execution" that was happening at exactly the same time. Even North America had a city, Cahokia, that in 1250 was roughly the size of London. In 1523, Giovanni da Verrazzano recorded that the whole Atlantic coast from the Carolinas up was "densely populated". In the 1540's, De Soto passed through what is now eastern Arkansas and found it "thickly set with great towns". Of course, that population density is possible only with intensive agriculture. Mann writes, "A traveler in 1669 reported that six square miles of maize typically encircled Haudenosaunee villages."

By the time the conquest really got going, all these societies had been wiped out by smallpox and other diseases introduced by the first Europeans. Explorers and conquerors found small tribes of forager-hunters in an untamed wilderness, and assumed it had been that way forever. In a blow to both primitivism and "progress", it turns out that most of these people were not living in the timeless ways of their ancestors — the "Indians" of American myth were *post-crash societies!*

The incredible biological abundance of North America was also a post-crash phenomenon. We've heard about the flocks of passenger pigeons darkening the sky for days, the tens of millions of bison trampling the great plains, the rivers so thick with spawning salmon that you could barely row a boat, the seashores teeming with life, the deep forests on which a squirrel could go from the Atlantic to the Mississippi without touching the ground. We don't know what North America would have looked like with no humans at all, but we do know it didn't look like that under the Indians. Bone excavations show that passenger pigeons were not even common in the 1400's. Indians specifically targeted pregnant deer, and wild turkeys before they laid eggs, to eliminate competition for maize and tree nuts. They routinely burned forests to keep

or complexity will fall to preindustrial levels. Hydroelectric and atomic fission plants are in no immediate danger, and every year there are new innovations in energy from sun, wind, waves, and biofuels. Alternative energy would be growing much faster with good funding, and in any case it's not necessary to convert the whole global infrastructure in the next twenty years. Even in a general collapse, if just one region has a surplus of sustainable energy, they can use it to colonize and re-"develop" the collapsed areas at their own pace. Probably this will be happening all over.

I don't think there's any escape from complex high-energy societies, so instead of focusing on avoiding them, we should focus on making them tolerable. This means, first, that our system is enjoyable for its participants — that the activities necessary to keep it going are experienced by the people who do them as meaningful and freely chosen. Second, our system must be ethical toward the world around it. My standards here are high — the totality of biological life on Earth must be better off with us than without us. And third, our system must not be inherently unstable. It might be destroyed by an asteroid or an ice age, but it must not destabilize itself internally, by having an economy that has to grow or die, or by depleting nonrenewable resources, or by having any trend at all that ratchets, that easily goes one way but can't go the other way without a catastrophe.

These three standards seem to be separate. When Orwell wrote that the future is "a boot stamping on a human face — forever", he was imagining a system that's internally stable but not enjoyable. Techno-utopians fantasize about a system that expands into space and lasts billions of years while crushing any trace of biological wildness. And some paranoids fear "ecofascism", a system that is stable and serves nature, but that represses most humans.

I think all these visions are impossible, for a reason that is overlooked in our machine-worshipping culture: that collapse often happens for psychological reasons. Erich Fromm said it best,

In *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, Fredy Perlman set out to document the whole history of resistance to civilization, and inadvertently undermined his conclusion, that this Leviathan will be the last, by showing again and again that resistance movements become the new dominators. The ancient Persian empire started when Cyrus was inspired by Zoroastrianism to sweep away the machinery of previous empires. The Roman empire started as a people's movement to eradicate the Etruscans. The modern nation-state began with the Moravians forming a defensive alliance against the Franks, who fell into warlike habits themselves after centuries of resisting the Romans. And we all know what happened with Christianity.

I fear it's going to happen again. Now, the simple desire to go primitive is harmless and beneficial — I wish luck and success to anyone who tries it, and I hope we always have some tribal forager-hunters around, just to keep the human potential stretched. And I enjoy occasional minor disasters like blackouts and snowstorms, which serve to strip away illusions and remind people that they're alive. I loved the idea in *Fight Club* (the movie) of destroying the bank records to equalize wealth. That's right in line with the ancient Jubilee tradition, where debts were canceled every few decades to stabilize the economy.[3]

But to cause a global hard crash (if it's even possible) would be a terrible mistake, and the root of it is old-fashioned authoritarian thinking: that if you force someone to do something, it's the same as if they do it on their own. In fact it's exactly the opposite. The more we are forced to abandon this system, the less we will learn, and the more aggressively we will fight to rebuild something like it. And the more we choose to abandon it, the more we will learn, and the less likely we will make the same mistakes.

Of course we will not have another society based on oil, and per-capita energy consumption will drop, but it's unlikely that energy

[3] www.yesmagazine.org

them convenient for human use. And they kept salmon and shellfish populations down by eating them, and thereby suppressed populations of other creatures that ate them. When human populations crashed, nonhuman populations exploded.

This fact drives a wedge between two value systems that are supposed to be synonymous: love of nature and love of primitive humans. We seem to have only two options. One is to say that native North Americans went too far — of course they weren't nearly as bad as Europeans, but we need to return to even lower levels of population and domestication. I respect this position morally, but strategically it's absurd. How can the future inhabitants of North America be held to a way of life that the original inhabitants abandoned at least a thousand years ago?

The other option is to say that native North Americans did not go too far. The subtext is usually something like this: "Moralistic ecologists think it's wrong that my society holds nature down and milks it for its own benefit, but if the *Native Americans* did it, it must be okay!" This conclusion is nearly universal in popular writing. Plenty of respectable authors would never be caught idealizing simple foragers, but when they find out these "primitives" hunted competitors and cleared forests to plant grain, out comes the "wise Indian" card.

There is a third option, but it requires abandoning the whole civilized-primitive framework. Suppose we say, "We can regrow the spectacular fecundity that North America had in the 1700's, not as a temporary stage between the fall of one Earth-monopolizing society and the rise of another, but as a permanent condition — and we will protect this condition not by duplicating any way our ancestors lived, but by inventing new ways. And these new ways will coexist with large complex societies, rather than depending on their destruction."

I admit this is a utopian pipe dream, something to aim for but not to bet on. To grow biological abundance for its own sake, and not for human utility, is still a fringe position. But my deeper point

is that the civilized-primitive framework forces us to divide things a certain way: On one side are complexity, change, invention, unstable "growth", taking, control, and the future. On the other side are simplicity, stasis, tradition, stability, giving, freedom, and the past. Once we abandon that framework, which is itself an artifact of western industrial society, we can integrate evidence that the framework excludes, and we can try to match things up differently.

The combination that I'm suggesting is: complexity, change, invention, stability, giving, freedom, and both the past and the future. This isn't the only combination that could be suggested, and I doubt it's the easiest to put into practice, but it's surprisingly noncontroversial. Al Gore would probably agree with every point. The catch is that Gore is playing to a public consciousness in which "freedom" means a nice paint job on control, and in which no one has any idea what's really necessary for stability.

Americans think freedom means *no restraint*. So I'm free to start a big company and rule ten thousand wage laborers, and if they don't like it they're free to go on strike, and I'm free to hire thugs to crack their heads, and they're free to quit, and I'm free to buy politicans to cut off support for the unemployed, so now they're free to either starve and die, or accept the job on my terms and use their freedom of speech to impotently complain.

A better definition of freedom is *no coercion*. I define "restraint" as preventing someone from doing something, and "coercion" as forcing someone to do something, usually by punishing them for *not* doing it. Primitive societies tend to be very good at avoiding coercion. In *The Continuum Concept*, Jean Liedloff writes that among the Yequana, it is forbidden to even *ask* another person to do something. It seems strange to us, but to have a society where no one is forced to do what they don't want to do, you actually need a lot of restraints.

So there's one place where we can learn more from looking backward than looking forward. But there is more than one way for coercion to appear — it's like a disease with multiple vectors. Prim-

Of course there are arguments that this will be impossible. One goes like this: "For civilization, you need agriculture, and for agriculture, you need topsoil. But the topsoil is gone! Agriculture survives only by dumping synthetic fertilizers on dead soil, and those fertilizers depend on oil, and the easily extracted oil is also gone. If the industrial system crashes just a little, we'll have no oil, no fertilizer, no agriculture, and therefore no choice but foraging and hunting."

Agriculture, whether or not it's a good idea, is in no danger. The movement to switch the whole planet to synthetic fertilizers on dead soil (ironically called "the Green Revolution") had not even started yet when another movement started to switch back: organic farming. Present organic farmers are still using oil to run tractors and haul supplies in, but in terms of getting the soil to produce a crop, organic farming *is* agriculture without oil, and it's the fastest growing segment of the food economy. It is being held back by cultural intertia, by the political power of industrial agribusiness, and by cheap oil. It is not being held back by any lack of land suitable for conversion to organic methods. No one says, "We bought this old farm, but since the soil is dead, we're just going to leave it as a wasteland, and go hunt elk." People find a way to bring the soil back.

Another argument is that "humanity has learned its lesson." I think this is on the right track, but too optimistic about how much we've learned, and about what kind of learning is necessary. Mere rebellion is as old as the first slave revolt in Ur, and you can find intellectual critiques of civilization in the Old Testament: From Ecclesiastes 5:11, *"When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof?"* And from Isaiah 5:8, *"Woe unto those who join house to house, and field to field, until there is no place."* If this level of learning were enough, we would have found utopia thousands of years ago. Instead, people whose understanding was roughly the same as ours, and whose courage was greater, kept making the same mistakes.

There are also growing movements to reduce energy consumption, to eat locally-produced food, to give up high-paying jobs for better quality of life, and to trade industrial-scale for human-scale tools. I would prefer not to own a car, but my motivation is not to save the world — it's that cars are expensive and I hate driving. I'll use a chainsaw when I have a huge amount of wood to cut, but generally I avoid power tools because they make me feel dependent on an industrial system that gives me no participation in power, and I feel stronger working with my own muscles.

When I look at the discourse around this kind of choice, it's positively satanic. People whose position is basically "Thundersaw cut fast, me feel like god" present themselves as agents of enlightenment and progress, while people with intelligent reasons for doing something completely new — choosing weaker, slower tools when high-energy tools are available — are seen as lizard-brained throwbacks. What's even worse is when they see themselves that way.

This movement is often called "voluntary simplicity", but we should distinguish between *technological* simplicity and *mental* simplicity. Primitive people, even when they have complex cultures, use simple tools for a simple reason — those are the only tools they have. In so-called "civilization", we've just been using more and more complex technologies for simple-minded reasons — they give us brute power and shallow pleasures. But as we learn to be more sophisticated in our thinking about technology, we will be able to use complex tools for complex reasons — or simple tools for complex reasons.

Primitivists, understandably, are impatient. They want us to go back to using simple tools and they don't care why we do it. It's like our whole species is an addict, and seductive advanced technologies are the drug, and primitivism is the urge to throw our whole supply of drugs in the garbage. Any experienced addict will tell you that doesn't work. The next day you dig it out of the garbage or the next week you buy more.

itive cultures have extraordinary resistance to the way coercion must have appeared over and over in their history — among a group of people who all know each other, an arrogant charismatic leader arises. But they have little or no resistance to another way it's been appearing more and more often over the last few thousand years: as a hidden partner with seductive new physical and social tools.

To understand what's necessary for both freedom and stability, we need to go deep into a close ally of the critique of civilization: the critique of technology. Now, as soon as you say you're against technology, some nit-picker points out that even a stone axe is a technology. We know what we mean, but we have trouble putting it into words. Our first instinct is to try to draw a line, and say that technologies on one side are bad, and on the other side are good. And at this point, primitivism comes into the picture as a convenience.

It reminds me of the debate over abortion, which is ultimately about drawing a line between when the potential child is part of the mother's body, and when it's a separate person with full rights. Drawing the line at the first breath would make the most sense on biblical grounds, but no one wants to do that, and almost no one wants to draw it at passage through the birth canal. But if you go farther back than that, you get an unbroken grey area all the way to conception! Fundamentalists love to draw the line at conception, not only because it gives them more control over women, but because they hate grey areas.

In the same way, primitivism enters the debate over good technology with a sharply drawn line a long way back. We don't have to wrestle with how to manufacture bicycles without exploitation, or how to make cities sustainable, or what uses are appropriate for water wheels, or how to avoid the atrocities of ancient empires, if we just draw the line between settled grain farmers and nomadic forager-hunters.

To be fair to primitivists, they still have to wrestle with the grey areas from foraging to horticulture to agriculture, and from

camps to villages to towns, and with arguments that we should go back even farther. The real fundamentalists on this issue are the techno-utopians. They say "technology is neutral," which really means "Thou shalt not ascribe built-in negative effects to any technology," but of course they ascribe built-in positive effects to technologies all the time. So it ends up being not a statement of fact but a command to action: "Any technology you can think of, do it!" This is like solving the abortion debate by legalizing murder.

We must apply intelligent selection to technology, but we aren't really worried that the neighboring village will reinvent metalworking and massacre our children with swords. We just want bulldozers to stop turning grassy fields into dreadful suburbs, and we want urban spaces to be made for people not cars, and we want to turn off the TV, and take down the surveillance cameras, and do meaningful work instead of sitting in windowless office dungeons rearranging abstractions to pay off loans incurred getting our spirits broken.

We like hot baths and sailing ships and recorded music and the internet, but we worry that we can't have them without exterminating half the species on Earth, or exploiting Asian sweatshop workers, or dumping so many toxins that we all get cancer, or overextending our system so far that it crashes and we get eaten by roving gangs.

But notice: primitive people don't think this way! Of course, if you put them on an assembly line or on the side of a freeway or in a modern war, they would know they were in hell. But if you offered them an LED lantern made on an assembly line, or a truck ride to their hunting ground, or a gun, most of them would accept it without hesitation. Primitive people tend to adopt any tool they find useful — not because they're wise, but because they're ignorant, because their cultures have not evolved defenses against tools that will lead them astray.

I think the root of civilization, and a major source of human evil, is simply that we became clever enough to extend our power beyond our empathy. It's like the famous Twilight Zone episode where there's a box with a button, and if you push it, you get a million dollars and someone you don't know dies. We have countless "boxes" that do basically the same thing. Some of them are physical, like cruise missiles or ocean-killing fertilizers, or even junk food where your mouth gets a million dollars and your heart dies. Others are social, like subsidies that make junk food affordable, or the corporation, which by definition does any harm it can get away with that will bring profit to the shareholders. I'm guessing it all started when our mental and physical tools combined to enable positive feedback in personal wealth. Anyway, as soon as you have something that does more harm than good, but that appears to the decision makers to do more good than harm, the decision makers will decide to do more and more of it, and before long you have a whole society built around obvious benefits that do hidden harm.

The kicker is, once we gain from extending our power beyond our seeing and feeling, we have an incentive to repress our seeing and feeling. If child slaves are making your clothing, and you want to keep getting clothing, you either have to not know about them, or know about them and feel good about it. You have to make yourself ignorant or evil.

But gradually we're learning. Every time it comes out that some product is made with more than the usual amount of exploitation, a few people stop buying it. Every day, someone is in a supermarket deciding whether to spend extra money to buy shade-grown coffee or fair trade chocolate. It's not making a big difference, but all mass changes have to start with a few people, and my point is that we are stretching the human conscience farther than it's ever gone, making sacrifices to help forests we will never see and people we will never meet. This is not simple-minded or "idealistic", but rational, sophisticated behavior. You find it not at the trailing edge of civilization but at the leading edge, among educated urbanites.