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Hope for the future

Primitivism offers no hope and no program for a revolutionary change of society. It includes some of the most reactionary and anti-human writings this side of fascism — I've even read primitivists writing off the death of the mass of the worlds population on the grounds that "quite a few of those 5.9 billion are just empty shells"[25]. But even the best of the writings offer no more than some interesting ideas to ponder over — ideas that have been around for the last 200 years.

There are real problems associated with the growth of the human population and the wasteful nature of capitalism. We are already seeing the emergence of long-term environmental problems even if the end is not yet nigh. But bad as the effects on the environment are, the real shame is that we live on a planet where millions starve in order that a tiny ruling class can live in absolute luxury.

Anarchism offers an alternative to the capitalist system — an alternative that can provide a decent life for everyone on the planet both in terms of material good and control over their own lives. But achieving this alternative is not a question of waiting for people to rise up — it is a question of organising the vast majority of the planet against the tiny elite who rule us.

Anarchist communism provides the best hope for freedom and the best model for fighting for freedom. It distils the lessons of hundreds of years of struggle — and of all the successes and failing of these struggles. It does not have 'the answer'; that is something that can only be created by the self-managed struggle of the mass of the population of this planet. Our role is to help the emergence of this struggle.

[25] Anon in the debate about Jensen at anarchistnews.org

when it comes to the ruthless nature of capitalism. Jay Gould the US financier & railroad businessman summed up this nature when he said, "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." Outside of a recent brief period in Western Europe and the USA capitalism has routinely deployed enormous repressive forces to defeat rebellion. In the 1970's it created military dictatorships, which killed tens of thousands of people across South America. In Central America in the 1980's it killed hundreds of thousands.

There have been moments in history when the ruling class was at least briefly defeated — the Russian and Spanish revolutions being the most common examples. But this was not a simple product of desperation — if desperation led to revolution than revolution would have swept the African ruling class away years ago. It was also a product of revolutionary organisation stretching over decades and a set of revolutionary ideas that could unite people in the struggle for a better world. Large-scale crisis can indeed bring about large-scale upheavals but without a positive revolutionary program that unites people such upheavals always end up with a new faction of the ruling class in the driving seat. In fact capitalism and the ruling class are so flexible that they can undergo apparent defeat only to end up back in control in a new form within years — as happened in Russia after 1917.

So yes, unless we are organised on a mass scale a "tiny wealthy elite" will indeed "continue to control vast natural resources in the event of collapse". They have hundreds of years of experience of doing just that. And they won't just use the much-depleted carrot to do so, they also have the stick and for much of world history it is the stick rather than the carrot that has had the lead role in keeping people in line. Technological developments mean one man in a helicopter can provide the same level of 'stick' that previously an army of hundreds was required for. They can still hire one half of the working class to kill the other half but in repression as with other areas these days they are able to downsize.

Last year I published the article 'Civilisation, Primitivism and Anarchism' ['Primitivism, anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilisationism: criticism'] to sketch out what I saw as the glaring contradictions in primitivism and where it clashed with anarchism. Primitivism, I argued, was an absurdity that could never happen without the 'removal' of the vast majority of the world's population. And far from being related to anarchism it was in contradiction with the basic tenet of anarchism; the possibility of having a free mass society without a state.

The article has circulated on and off-line over the year and sparked numerous discussions. A number of primitivists, including John Zerzan[1], have replied directly to it, and others have published what appear to be indirect replies. Here I want to answer the direct replies and, in doing so, expand the critique of primitivism.

The original essay was also using 'primitivism' as a stalking horse to address what I see as one of the major problems in anarchism as it appears in the 'English speaking' world. That is a large-scale failure to take itself seriously. So-called 'anarcho'-primitivism is the most obvious example. But sections of the actual anarchist movement have also constructed a set of ideological positions that almost seem designed to make successful mass work impossible. Large sections of the anarchist movement seem to have forgotten that the goal of anarchism is to change the world, not simply to provide a critique of the left or be a minor thorn in the side of the state.

Is primitivism realistic?

This reply continues in the same vein, on the surface it is about primitivism but you don't have to dig that deep to see that some of the criticisms can be applied in a more general sense. A good place to start in that context is with a poster calling himself Aragon who posted on more than one of the sites that carried the original

[1] The first comment in reply to the posting of the article on Anarchist News appears to be from Zerzan (it's posted anonymously but refers to 'I' in disputing what Zerzan has said and is signed JZ). Mind you it could be another primitivist impersonating him — they do a fair bit of that. anarchistnews.org

article. In a comment on AnarchistNews.org Aragon states that Flood "seems to focus his critique on what he calls the question of whether primitivism provides 'any sort of realistic alternative' which always seems like a bizarre metric for an anarchist to use as measurement"[2]. This is the statement that inspired the title of this essay. Here we have someone who openly proclaims it to be "bizarre" to even ask if primitivism provides a realistic alternative to capitalism.

Far from being a refutation to the original essay this re-enforces the central point of it. That there is no way the advocates of primitivism could take the idea seriously if they thought its consequences through. A lot of primitivism theory strikes me as the work of those who like playing with ideas but really have no idea of how these ideas could be implemented. As with Aragon who even finds the idea of implementation of his own ideas "bizarre". But this is also a problem in the anarchist movement. All too often plans are drawn up or slogans trotted out without asking if they are realistic. Can they actually achieve what they claim to be about? The only test that appears to be used is whether the plan is 'pure' enough. What sort of test is this for anything except perhaps for a religious sect?

The core issue

Generally responses to the essay from primitivists were often a lot more constructive then what I expected. I expected to get mostly abuse, and I did but a few did attempt to address the arguments. However there was no real attempt to address the core point of my original article. Which was that the 'population question' made a joke out of any claim by primitivism to be anything beyond a critique of the world. This is unsurprising — as far as I can tell there is no answer to the very obvious problem that emerges when you compare

[2] At anarchistnews.org — in fact 'Aragon' may simply not understand what was said in the original as the realistic alternative referred to was in relation to current society and not social revolution i.e. "Facing this challenge anarchists need to first look to see if primitivism offers any sort of realistic alternative to the world as it is."

> Wages will be lowered and regulations waived to accommodate the bosses. The entire area will become a free-enterprise zone. A flat tax will be imposed. All under the guise of economic revival premised on the belief that corporations freed from trades unions, workers rights, environmental restrictions and taxes will reap huge profits and those profits will grow the pie for everybody"[24].

This is the way capitalism works — crisis are opportunities for new investment for those companies in favour (e.g. Halliburton in Iraq) and excuses to impose cuts on the working class (e.g. the introduction of the bin tax in Dublin). Mass death and destruction have often been a central part of the development of capitalism — not a threat to it. For capitalism they can be opportunities to remove 'unproductive people' from the land. (e.g. Irish famine of the 1840's). Much of the original wealth on which capitalism was founded was part and parcel of the process that almost entirely wiped out the indigenous people of the America's. Today tens of millions of people die every year from diseases that are easily preventable.

There is also nothing automatic about poverty or a decline in living standards being met with mass revolt. Capitalism, and the market in particular, is also an inbuilt mechanism though which the population are encouraged to accept the hoarding of scarce resources as natural. In the west today this means the rich have access to fast cars, luxury homes and private yachts — not that much of a hardship for the rest of us. But elsewhere in the world the rich have access to these things while the poor literally starve in the streets. If there was to be a real crisis in world food production then this is what would visit the working class in the USA and beyond. To a minor extent this is what happened in depression era America and in post war Europe. In neither case did it lead to significant revolts never mind the collapse of civilisation.

The second reason why a major crisis would not automatically lead to the fall of capitalism is more brutal. The need to spell it out simply reflects the rather naive thinking of a lot of primitivists

[24] The real looting of New Orleans begins online at www.anarkismo.net

against it. This ability is what is needed to create freedom, it has been at the centre of all modern revolutionary processes. Even if we could, why would we want to give up the ability to think abstractly?

Class conflict?

Teapolitik and other commentators take issue with me pointing out that even if a major environmental crisis resulted in large-scale death and destruction this would not necessarily mean the end of capitalism. Teapolitik asserts that "A 'tiny wealthy elite' could not possibly continue to control vast natural resources in the event of collapse — when one elite can no longer hold a carrot in front of thousands of poor, those poor will revolt." This assertion is wishful thinking for two reasons — not least that the ruling class has seldom maintained power through dangling the carrot alone.

Firstly it presumes that the crisis will somehow creep up on the ruling class — that they will be unable to react or prepare for it. Capitalism is very much more adaptable than this. For example there has been a huge amount of research on alternative energy sources over the last few years as some capitalists anticipate making a substantial profit out of peak oil. On flicking through a recent issue of the 'Economist' magazine — which is close to being a bible for many CEO's — I noticed that 6 out of the dozen or so glossy full page ads were to do with alternatives to oil or energy saving technologies like hybrid cars. The transnational corporation BP (British Petroleum) Amoco rebranded itself Beyond Petroleum back in the year 2000. Although this was rightly seen as at attempt to Greenwash it was also to manovure itself for the new energy markets that would open up as oil declined.

On a more local scale the large scale destruction from Hurricane Katrina is actually being used by capitalism to restructure parts of the New Orleans economy in their interests. Anarcho has written that Bush's plans for New Orleans amount to a;

> "blank sheet upon which the far-right will unleash their plans for social engineering. Children will go to school with vouchers.

the number of people living on the planet (6 billion plus) and the optimistic maximum of 100 million (2% of this) that the planet might be able to support if civilisation was abandoned for a return to a hunter-gather existence[3].

I'll summarise my argument from the previous essay. Primitivism generally argues that the development of agriculture was where it all went wrong. It therefore implies we should return to pre-agricultural methods of getting food, that is hunter-gathering. But agriculture allows us to get vastly greater quantities of food from a given area. Estimates can be made of how many people could live on the planet as hunter-gathers based on the amount of food that would be available to them. These estimates suggest a maximum population of around 100 million.

This is what is called an 'Elephant in the living room' argument. The question of what would happen to the other 5,900 million people is so dominant that it makes discussion of the various other claims made by primitivism seem a waste of time until the population question is answered. Yet the only attempts at a response showed a rather touching faith in technology and civilisation, quite a surprise[4]. This response can by summarised as that such population reductions can happen slowly over time because people can be convinced to have fewer or even no children.

There was no attempted explanation for how convincing the 6 billion people of the earth to have no children might go ahead. Programs that advocate lower numbers of children are hardly a new idea. They have already been implemented both nationally and globally without much success. China's infamous 'One Child' program

[3] Note that this is an optimistic maximum — quite often I multiplied the real probable maximum by a figure of ten to avoid pointless arguments as to whether Ireland for instance could support 20,000 hunter gathers rather than the 7,000 my figures would calculate out. I mention this because the folks over at LibCom.org didn't get what I was doing and 'corrected' my error in the edited version they published at www.libcom.org

[4] By this I mean the persuasion mechanism proposed assumes some form of global communication in order to reach everyone on the planet — something that does not yet exist and some form of near 100% reliable contraception that everyone on the planet could have access to — something else that does not yet exist!

includes a high degree of compulsion but has not even resulted in a population decrease. China's population is forecast to grow by 100 to 250 million by 2025. An explanation of how primitivists hope to achieve by persuasion what others have already failed to do by compulsion is needed yet no such attempt to even sketch this out exists.

As if this was not difficult enough for primitivists the implications of other arguments they make turn an impossible task into an even more impossible task. For primitivist arguments normally include the idea that civilisation is about to create a major crisis that will either end, or come close to ending life on the planet. Whether caused by peak oil, global warming or another side effect of technology we are told this crisis is at best a few decades away.

Even if primitivists could magically convince the entire population of the planet to have few or no children this process could only reduce the population over generations. But if a crisis is only decades away there is no time for this strategy. For even if 90% of the population was to be magically convinced tomorrow it would still take decades for the population to reduce to the 100 million or less that could be supported by hunter-gathering. And in the real world there is no mechanism for magically convincing people of any argument — not least one that requires them to ignore what many people find to be a fundamental biological drive to have children. Some of the older primitivists I know even have children themselves. If they can't convince themselves then why do they think they can convince everyone else?

The contradiction between these two positions is so obvious that I can only conclude that those primitivists who have put forward this 'convince everyone to have fewer babies' position have only done so in order to shore up their faith. It is an argument invented to try and hide the elephant in the living room but really it only hides it from themselves. It is impossible to see how they could expect anyone else to find it a convincing answer to the population question.

> *what we think of as symbolic. Possibly a more direct kind in keeping with a more direct connection with the natural world. Well, this is a long topic that I won't try to rehash here. One that doesn't quite fit Flood's sound byte characterization . . .* "[20]

This section appears to be a reply to where I was explaining my methodology in choosing 'agriculture' as representing the start of civilization. I'd actually mentioned Zerzan only twice in the original article. Why might I have thought Zerzan rejected 'abstract thought'? Well partly because I had presumed "symbolic thought" and "abstract thought" pretty much amounted to the same thing. But in any case Zerzan has also appeared to specifically attack "abstract thought". In his essay on "Number: Its Origin and Evolution"[21] he writes, "Math is the paradigm of abstract thought" and then "Mathematics is reified, ritualized thought, the virtual abandonment of thinking". To me this — and similar sentiments along the same lines elsewhere in his essay — sound a lot like a rejection of abstract thought.

In his reply he also seems keen to tell me you can have intelligence without "symbolic culture". I can only agree — geese for instance manage to migrate large distances but don't as far as I'm aware produce any art. But he may be wrong that evidence for symbolic culture in humans only goes back 40,000 years. Ian Watts of University College London claims red ochre and other red pigments were being used at least 100,000 and 120,000 years ago and that "new findings in Zambia and the re-dating of the important Border Cave site in South Africa push the date of the earliest use back further still-perhaps to 170,000 years ago in Zambia."[22] Given that the "oldest fossil evidence for anatomically modern humans is about 130,000 years old"[23] this would suggest symbolic culture (or symbolic thought) is as old as *homo sapiens*.

Anyway, to be honest, I'm all for abstract thought. I like the ability to read a text, to think about its contents and perhaps then to argue

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20 See preceding note.

21 'Number: Its Origin and Evolution' at www.primitivism.com

22 'Painted Ladies', *New Scientist* Oct 2001, online at homepages.uel.ac.uk

23 www.mnh.si.edu

to blend primitivism into vegetarianism or even veganism[19]. This really only serves to underline how some primitivists have not really given any serious thought to what they advocate at all — very few ecosystems could support vegan humans attempting to live off the land without agriculture. As far as I'm aware all 'primitive' societies that exist today on the planet carry out hunting as well as gathering.

In this context I am indeed a "damn speciesist" who doesn't have a problem with humans "exploiting the land for you own good (taking away vital habitat and feeding ground)". Ecological diversity should be preserved because it is in our ability to do so and doing so will be good for us rather than because we prefer trees to people or because otherwise the earth will be upset. All actually existing 'primitive' peoples are "speciesist" — they hunt animals. The luxury of some people choosing not to eat meat at all is a feature of civilization.

Abstract or symbolic — who cares?

I'll also deal with the remainder of Zerzan's reply to my original essay here as he is the the leading light of 'anarcho' primitivism and I'd hate people to think I was avoiding part of his argument.. The remainder of his reply reads;

> *"Flood probably knows that nowhere have I rejected "abstract thought" but it better serves his weak assault on "primitivism" to say otherwise. Some of our ancestors were cooking with fire 2 million years ago, travelling on the open seas 800,000 years ago. And yet the evidence for symbolic culture hardly goes back 40,000 years. Thus, it would seem, there was intelligence that preceded*

authoritativeness of your commentary". He asserts that "many writers like Flood do not seem to have much training in biology or ecology" as if this should exclude anyone from commenting on such issues. They are just another version of the sort of anonymous comment left on Anarchist News that asserted "who by now, doesn't know that andrew flood is an idiot? .. try not to innundate this board with such obviously superceded nonsense as just about everything written by flood and his cretinous supporters."

[19] Vegan Hobo — www.anarkismo.net

Zerzan's reply

John Zerzan's reply to my essay included a variation of this defence of primitivism.

> "It could also be noted that population is hardly a given. It seems to be more an effect than a cause, for instance: an effect of domestication *ab origino* (Latin for 'from the beginning/from the source'[5]), if we are talking about civilization. And so it seems to me likely that the numbers might come down fairly quickly were we to move away from domestication. I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight, Flood to the contrary."[6]

Well first off population is a given. I am not imagining that there are 6 billion people on the earth — there are six billion plus on the planet. We cannot simply wish that there were 100 million. There are 6 billion and this is a figure that is forecast to rise. Whatever about the forces that drove the development of agriculture 12,000 years ago (where there is a debate about cause and effect) the reality today is that stopping the cultivation of all domestic plants and animals would result in the death by starvation of 5.9 billion people. So yes a move away from domestication would indeed mean that "numbers might come down fairly quickly": starvation only takes a few months.

Zerzan is also misquoting me. I never claimed that some primitivists said civilisation had to go "overnight". One can see why Zerzan needed to invent this particular red herring, like other primitivists he believes that time is running out. In an interview with fellow primitivist academic Derrick Jensen, Zerzan himself said "in a few decades there won't be much left to fight for. Especially when you consider the acceleration of environmental degradation and personal dehumanization." Again I'll point out if we only have "a few

[5] What is it with academics and the use of obscure Latin? See my remarks on this in my review of 'Empire' at www.struggle.ws

[6] See note 1.

decades" this is hardly the time span in which a 'voluntary' reduction of the earth's population by some 98% could occur. In particular as the Earth's population is actually forecast to rise to perhaps to as much as 10 billion in that time.

The evasive language Zerzan uses in his response to me is typical of the primitivist approach to the population question. And although he might throw out the red herring that "I do not know anyone who says this could happen overnight "in the original essay I actually quoted some primitivists who either saw the collapse of civilisation as a short term inevitability or who worse — like Derrick Jensen — wanted to bring it on. As I pointed out in the original article, Jensen is on record as writing "I want civilization brought down and I want it brought down now"[7]. In fact since my article was published he has taken this further with a call for concrete action "We need people to take out dams, and we need people to knock out electrical infrastructures"[8]. So while Zerzan may be smart enough to be evasive on this not all of his followers are[9]. And while Zerzan may have forgotten Jensen he does know him — at least he was interviewed by him in 2000[10] and the 10,000 word interview that was published which would suggest they have at least spent some hours in each others company.

Zerzan, like other primitivists, continues to evade the logic of his own position. It's all very well to talk of a gradual population reduction but just how does he think primitivists are going to achieve

[7] Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*, this interview online at crow.riseup.net

[8] Derrick Jensen, Ripping up Asphalt and Planting Gardens, Oct 2005, online at www.raisethehammer.org

[9] It seems fair enough to describe Jensen as a follower of Zerzan as Jensen has described Zerzan as "The best anarchist thinker of our time", "the most important anarchist thinker of our time" or more frankly "I love all of Zerzan's books, but I think I love this one the best." In his review of Zerzan's 'Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections" for Amazon.com

[10] Derrick Jensen interviews John Zerzan , *Alternative Press Review*, at www.altpr.org Given that the Wikipedia entry on 'anarcho' primitivism includes "in the United States primitivism has been notably advocated by writer John Zerzan and to a lesser extent author Derrick Jensen" I find Zerzan's implied claim in his reply to me to have forgotten Jensen and what he has to say incredible — but maybe they have fallen out?

However unlike some Peak Oil enthusiasts and all primitivists I am not willing to argue that we need to 'go back' to some simpler time when less energy inputs were required because that would involve accepting the removal of billions of people from the planet.

A social revolution that not only introduces new technology but re-models what already exists is the only logical way forward. In that context technology is what we do with it. In the general sense it is neither liberatory nor repressive. Particular applications of technology may be either — a rifle in the hands of a US marine is different in that sense from a rifle in the hands of a Zapatista. The birth control pill certainly plays a part in giving women choices about reproduction that were previously hard to come by safely. It also allows here to control her fertility without the co-operation of her partner. On the other hand it is impossible to think of a positive use of the electric chair or a nuclear bomb.

It is also true that the development of technology made it possible to have a society where there was a division into workers and bosses. Once you can store surplus food for instance you can have accumulation of meaningful wealth and so the ability to pay the soldier, the policeman and the executioner. So the question comes down to whether it's possible to have a free technological society — and anarchism insists it is — or whether the choice is between a primitive 'freedom' and an oppressive technological society.

The vast majority of political theories, perhaps all except anarchism, do indeed claim you cannot have a free technological society. I think it is worth hoping they are wrong even if we have never as yet had such a society. That a free technological society is possible is — as I have argued — the central point of anarchism.

Some of the odder stuff

The replies also included areas that in my view are of much lesser importance[18]. Amongst those are responses from some who attempt

[18] For instance I'm not terribly interested in critiques like that of Heineken (at peakoil.com) who worry about my "educational background and therefore of the

But this isn't typical of the rest of the world, not even of parts of the US. If you lived in Manhattan for instance, for day-to-day life a car is more of a problem then a requirement. People across huge areas of the planet have a very low percentage of car ownership — in the most part because people are too poor to afford individual cars. Yet those with money still have access to mass transportation. If you go anywhere in North Africa you can travel long distances rapidly and at ease, reaching even quite small towns because the lack of individual car ownership has created a market for an incredibly sophisticated network of collective taxis. They leave from fixed points in each town whenever a vehicle is full. Really busy routes also have trains and buses. The point is that even under capitalism alternative ways of dealing with the need for transportation already exist — there is nothing inevitable about the 'car culture' that is a feature of how the technology of the internal combustion engine has been used in the USA.

Some of the replies focused on my treatment of technology and in particular the contention that the only way out of the population crisis is both more technology and more access to technology. Unsurprisingly, as I used the peak oil theory in the original essay this resulted in discussion on some of the sites dedicated to discussing Peak Oil. Omar for instance thought this means I "argue technology as the saviour"[17] — others even thought this meant I was in favour of atomic weapons!

These misunderstandings are probably my fault for stating the case too crudely in the original. It is worth deepening the discussion. My position it that the combination of modern capitalism and the way it uses technology has given us an unstable and unsustainable economic system that only even attempts to address the interests of a small minority of the planets population. And although I may not believe 'the end is nigh' I do accept that things cannot go on as they are without major problems.

Of course being an anarchist I already want to overthrow capitalism and see the economy restructured from top to bottom. So saying things cannot continue as they are presents me with no difficulties.

[17] online at peakoil.com

a population reduction from 6 billion to 0.1 billion "in a few decades"? What would be gradual about this? This would require a ban on all but 2% of the earth's population having any children at all!

The ball is really in Zerzan's court; he needs to demonstrate a mechanism for a non-compulsory and rapid reduction in population that would require the vast majority of the earth's population to be happy to have no children at all. He needs to explain how he can even explain this message to all of the people in the world — never mind convince them of it. And Zerzan needs a 'voluntary' mechanism of ensuring that those he fails to convince do not undermine this reduction, for instance religious or other minorities who disagree with the primitivists and choose to have many children . And all this has to happen within his own deadline of "a few decades". With this sort of burden of proof it is easy to see why primitivists are not so keen on demonstrating that they have a realistic alternative.

The nasty side

Those not blinded by ideology looking at this burden of proof will conclude either that primitivism is of no practical use or that those primitivists who are rational and still hold to primitivism have some program they are not revealing. Quite clearly some of those who see themselves as primitivists do favour die offs or advocate policies that would make them inevitable. Jensen's call for people "to take out dams . . . to knock out electrical infrastructures" would result in large numbers of deaths if any number of people were to take him seriously. It's just a toned down version of Steve Booth's lauding of the Tokyo Sarin attacks and Booth's fantasy in *Green Anarchist* that "One day the groups will be totally secretive and their methods of fumigation will be completely effective." These sorts of murderous anti-human sentiments are not only tolerated within primitivism but their authors are promoted — you'll find their essays uncritically reproduced all over the web and in various print publications.

My previous essay produced howls of outrage because I pointed out the existence of such writings. But the problem here is not that I point out their existence, it is that the primitivists ignore them

until it is pointed out. Yet they work with these people, they publish these people and then they shuffle around with embarrassment and cry unfair when what they say is pointed out. And it is not just the primitivists even sections of the anarchist movement in the name of maintaining a broad church uncritically publish Jensen and invite him to address meetings. This is quite astounding given the consequences of what he is advocating. I can only presume he is tolerated in some anarchist circles because of the general confusion that equates militant tactics with militant politics, forgetting that elements of the far right can also use militant tactics.

There is no critique of the die off point of view from those who call themselves 'anarcho'-primitivists. Zerzan is happy to do a lengthy interview with someone who says he wants "civilization brought down and I want it brought down now" without even bringing the consequences of such a position up with them. If he wanted to distance himself from Jensen he has already had the opportunity to do so.

The centrality of the agricultural revolution

Elsewhere Zerzan has written of the development of agriculture that;

> "The debasing of life in all spheres, now proceeding at a quickening pace, stems from the dynamics of civilization itself. Domestication of animals and plants, a process only 10,000 years old, has penetrated every square inch of the planet. The result is the elimination of individual and community autonomy and health, as well as the rampant, accelerating destruction of the natural world"[11]

This is relevant because a number of people who replied objected to me choosing the development of agriculture as the point at which

[11] Globalisation and its apologists. An abolitionist perspective, by John Zerzan, online at www.insurgentdesire.org.uk

in reality at odds with anarchism. There have been at least three such streams in the last two decades, 'anarcho'-capitalism, post-leftism and 'anarcho'-primitivism. All three have used a similar methodology of trying to re-label anarchism as 'left anarchism' (or sometimes 'red anarchism'). All three have shared the same ideological anti-communist 'rugged individualism' by which all forms of collective mass organisation can only be authoritarian.

It is hard not to write this off as simply a radical reflections of the state ideology of the USA. In the case of primitivism it also accepts George Bush's claims that USA society has to have the car culture. For Bush this means the USA has to sacrifice the environment in order to maintain its current standard of living. Primitivism accepts the first claim but unlike Bush rejects the price as too great to carry. So primitivism seeks the end of civilization itself. Like Bush it also seems unwilling to admit that elsewhere on the planet people already organise their lives in ways that have a much lower energy demand. Even Western Europe which has a similar standard of living to the USA has per person a use of energy half that of the USA.

Technology

The technology question causes a huge amount of confusion with primitivists mixing up a particular form or consequence of technology with the technology itself. I had tried to deal with this in the original essay using the example of motorised transport. Yet some replies were from people in the USA who couldn't get their heads around the idea of the technology of motorised transport being used in any other way than the way it is used in the USA. There it is perhaps more reasonable for someone to believe that *"car culture could not be likely eliminated without destroying civilisation"*[16]. US culture and urban geography means that right now there are huge areas of the country where owning a car is pretty essential to survival.

[16] E.g. Heretic posting on the infoshop.org posting of the original essay — online at www.infoshop.org

freedom though a range of bottom up organising methods. Mass society and freedom are possible. This is something primitivists deny.

In a similar vein Kropotkin wrote;

> "recent evolution . . . has prepared the way for showing the necessity and possibility of a higher form of social organisation that may guarantee economic freedom without reducing the individual to the role of a slave to the State. The origins of government have been carefully studied, and all metaphysical conceptions as to its divine or "social contract" derivation having been laid aside, it appears that it is among us of a relatively modern origin, and that its powers have grown precisely in proportion as the division of society into the privileged and unprivileged classes was growing in the course of ages"[15]

Here Kroptkin is arguing that humanity can create forms of mass organisation that do not require the state and which can create economic freedom. And while the liberals may argue that the state is required for the existence of mass society this seems to be a recent argument invented to justify the division of society into classes.

As can be seen — from the beginning — anarchism has included a rejection of the core idea of primitivism — that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between mass society and liberty. It has sought alternative ways to organize mass society that eliminate the role of the state. For these "free federation of individuals, associations, communes, districts, provinces, and nations within humanity" are all features of mass society. In the 1860's the argument that there was such an irreconcilable contradiction was an anti-anarchist argument — one that the anarchists took the time to refute. To try and incorporate the same argument into anarchism today is to make nonsense of the term anarchism.

For some reason there is a very strong tendency in the USA for the emergence of ideologies which use the label anarchist but which are

[15] Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles by Peter Kropotkin online at www.zabalaza.net

civilisation can be said to have developed[12]. But as the original essay explained, "Of course civilization is a rather general term .. For the purposes of this article I'm taking as a starting point that the form of future society that primitivists argue for would be broadly similar in technological terms to that which existed around 12,000 years ago on earth, at the dawn of the agricultural revolution". I could have picked an older date — the first cave paintings for instance but this would not only have been more arbitrary but would have presented an even greater population problem for the primitivists.

I could have picked a more recent date but this would hardly have helped the primitivists as they then would have had to include many of the features of civilisation — including the state — in their primitive utopia. And, as our ability to support a large population has escalated sharply in recent years, even a 'primitive' society that only aimed to return to say, 1800 would still have to get rid of the majority of the earth's population. Evasion aside, it is quite clear that from the primitivist point of view it was the agricultural revolution and the changes that happened alongside this where things went bad.

For understandable reasons (not wanting to deal with the population question) primitivists and their fellow travellers tend to avoid any date even as general as the agricultural revolution. But it's the one I choose to work with and this appears to be fair enough with those primitivists more willingly to openly argue their position. Agriculture also seems a very logical starting point because agriculture is what makes a mass society possible. Hunter-gathers can't gather in large groups for a long period because they exhaust local food sources. Nor do small groups of hunter-gathers generally have the surplus food required to develop a high degree of specialisation of labour, and any specialisation is a bad thing according to most primitivists.

[12] Teapolitik in the third comment on the AnarchistNews posting and in some of the other places my original essay was posted e.g. www.livejournal.com Teapolitik also says "I am not a primitivist" in some versions of this reply. Joe Licentia who also says "I'm not a primitivist" also questions my equating of agriculture with civilisation in his 'Critique of "Civilisation, Primitivism and anarchism" online at question-everything.mahost.org

I also think its hard to construct a coherent primitivism that does not exclude agriculture since the dawn of agriculture and class society seem to occur together. This fact has been understood on the left at least as far back as Engels 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' and I'll discuss its implications next. But in terms of the overall argument about food production this is a side argument — the earths current population requires the agricultural technology of the last 100 odd years — going back to primitive agriculture is not much more of an option then going back to Hunter-gathering. It would still leave billions of facing death by starvation.

Is primitivism a branch of anarchism?

It is true that agriculture is required before the surplus is generated on which a state structure can be built. This is about the only argument the primitivists have — the state has always been a feature of civilisation. The challenge for those who want to abolish the state — and this has always been understood as a central challenge of anarchism from the 1860's — is to create a civilisation that does not have the mechanisms of state repression that all civilisations to date have had.

This brings me onto another issue that upset some of those who wrote replies to my essay. Teapolitik's "Primitivism isn't, in itself, a critique of anarchism at all. It is a supplement to anarchism" is the best-developed expression of this sort of reply. Teapolitik goes on to assert that ". . . civilization (and for some, technology, agriculture, language, and other products of human society) is not compatible with ecological sustainability — and that the persistence of civilization, whether feudal, capitalist, socialist or anarchist, would lead to the eventual destruction of the life-sustaining qualities of this planet."[13]

I think the case for primitivism being a break with rather than a development of anarchism is very clear — I outlined this at some length in my original article. The primitivist argument is essentially

[13] See preceding note.

identical to the liberal argument for why the state is necessary. The state they claim is what allows mass society to exist — without the state we would have 'the war of all against all'. The primitivists agree but as they are anti-state they are therefore required to also be anti-mass society. Yet the origins of anarchism lie in a movement that sought to go beyond this seeming contradiction — a movement built on the idea that you could have a free society without the state. This was the ideological corner stone on which anarchism is founded.

Bakunin, for instance writing on Rousseau's Theory of the State, wrote in words that are as applicable to the core argument of primitivism as they were at the time to liberalism that;

> "According to the theory .. primitive men enjoying absolute liberty only in isolation are antisocial by nature. When forced to associate they destroy each other's freedom. If this struggle is unchecked it can lead to mutual extermination." But for anarchists "it is now proven that no state could exist without committing crimes, or at least without contemplating and planning them, even when its impotence should prevent it from perpetrating crimes, we today conclude in favour of the absolute need of destroying the states. Or, if it is so decided, their radical and complete transformation so that, ceasing to be powers centralised and organised from the top down, by violence or by authority of some principle, they may recognise — with absolute liberty for all the parties to unite or not to unite, and with liberty for each of these always to leave a union even when freely entered into — from the bottom up, according to the real needs and the natural tendencies of the parties, through the free federation of individuals, associations, communes, districts, provinces, and nations within humanity."[14]

Bakunin's argument is that liberals insist that large numbers of people cannot live together without a state to supervise them as they would come into conflict with each other. But anarchists insist that large numbers of people can come together and preserve their

[14] Bakunin in Rousseau's Theory of the State online at dwardmac.pitzer.edu