*Andrew Flood*

# Primitivism, anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilisationism: criticism

# Contents

libcom.org's analysis and criticism of anarcho-primitivists, who are opposed to technology. Some are also opposed to mass society, civilisation and language.

## Foreword

The central tenet of primitivism, anarcho-primitivism and anti-civilisationism is the abolition of technology. For most people, arguing against this is completely unnecessary, since it is immediately obvious that it is a terrible idea. Even given the most cursory glance it is clear that abolishing technology would have devastating consequences for humankind and the planet.[1]

For starters, the 50%[2] of the UK population who need glasses or contact lenses (which rises to 97% over the age of 65[3]) would soon be left severely impaired. Tens of millions of people dependent on drug treatments for illnesses would quickly die. Radioactive nuclear waste needs to be monitored and controlled with high-tech equipment for tens of thousands of years. Without it, even if buried deep underground, climate changes and tectonic plate movements will eventually cause it to leak out and wreak ecological devastation on the planet. This aside from the all the other obviously unattractive prospects of this idea — no more books, recorded music, medical equipment, central heating, sewage systems... — means that almost everyone would reject this idea immediately. However, within and around anarchist circles these ideas do have some support, so this article will examine them in more detail.

## Introduction

Over the last decade a generalised critique of civilisation has been made by a number of authors, mostly based in the USA. Some of these have chosen to identify as anarchists although the more general self-identification is primitivist. Their overall argument is that 'civilisation' (i.e. mass, technological society) itself is the problem that results in our failure to live rewarding lives. The struggle for change is thus a struggle against civilisation and for an earth where technology has been eliminated. This is an interesting argument that has some merits as an intellectual exercise. But the problem is that some of its adherents have used

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[1] This foreword was written by libcom. What follows is an article by Andrew Flood which we have edited **www.libcom.org**

[2] **news.zdnet.co.uk**

[3] **www.tiresias.org**

primitivism as a base from which to attack all other proposals for changing society. Facing this challenge anarchists need to first look to see if primitivism offers any sort of realistic alternative to the world as it is.

## An alternative?

Our starting point is that the expression 'life is hard' can always receive the reply that 'it is better than the alternative'. This provides a good general test of all critiques of the world 'as it is', including anarchism — which is to ask if a better alternative is possible.

Even if we can't point to the 'better alternative', criticisms of the world 'as it is' can have a certain intellectual value. But after the disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when so-called alternatives like Leninism created long lasting dictatorships that killed millions, the question 'is your alternative any better then what exists?' has to be put to anyone advocating change.

The primitivist critique of anarchism is based around the claim to have discovered a contradiction between liberty and mass society. In other words they see it as impossible for any society that involves groups much larger than a village to be a free society. If this was true it would make the anarchist proposal of a world of 'free federations of towns, cities and countryside' impossible. Such federations and population centres are obviously a form of mass society/civilisation.

However the anarchist movement has been answering this very so-called contradiction since its origins. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal defenders of the state pointed to such a contradiction in order to justify the need for one set of men to rule over another. Anarchist-communist Mikhail Bakunin answered this in 1871 in his essay on 'The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State"[4].

> It is said that the harmony and universal solidarity of individuals with society can never be attained in practice because their interests, being antagonistic, can never be reconciled. To this objection I reply that if these interests have never as yet come to mutual accord, it was because the State has sacrificed the interests of the majority for the benefit of a privileged minority. That is why this famous incompatibility, this conflict of personal interests with those of society, is nothing but a fraud, a political lie, born of the theological lie which invented the doctrine of original sin in order to dishonour man and destroy his self-respect.

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[4] libcom.org

. . . We are convinced that all the wealth of man's intellectual, moral, and material development, as well as his apparent independence, is the product of his life in society. Outside society, not only would he not be a free man, he would not even become genuinely human, a being conscious of himself, the only being who thinks and speaks. Only the combination of intelligence and collective labour was able to force man out of that savage and brutish state which constituted his original nature, or rather the starting point for his further development. We are profoundly convinced that the entire life of men — their interests, tendencies, needs, illusions, even stupidities, as well as every bit of violence, injustice, and seemingly voluntary activity — merely represent the result of inevitable societal forces. People cannot reject the idea of mutual independence, nor can they deny the reciprocal influence and uniformity exhibiting the manifestations of external nature.

## What level of technology?

Most primitivists evade the question of what level of technology they wish to return to by hiding behind the claim that they are not arguing for a return to anything, on the contrary they want to go forward. With that in mind a reasonable summary of their position is that certain technologies are acceptable up to the level of small village society sustained by hunting and gathering. The problems for primitivists start with the development of agriculture and mass society.

Of course civilisation (also rarely defined by primitivists) is a rather general term, as is technology. Few of these primitivists have taken this argument to its logical conclusion. One who has is John Zerzan who identifies the root of the problem in the evolution of language and abstract thought. This is a logical end point for the primitivist rejection of mass society.

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. By this I do not claim that they want to 'go back', something that is in any case impossible. But rather that if you seek to go forward by getting rid of all the technology of the agricultural revolution and beyond what results will look quite like pre-agricultural society of 10,000 BC. As this is the only example we have of such a society in operation it seems reasonable to use it to evaluate the primitivist claims.

## A question of numbers

Hunter-gatherers live off the food they can hunt or gather, hence the name. Animals can be hunted or trapped while fruits, nuts, greens and roots are gathered. Before about 12,000 years ago every human on the planet lived as a hunter gather. Today only a tiny number of people do, in isolated and marginal regions of the planet including deserts, artic tundra and jungle. Some of these groups like the Acre have only had contact with the rest of the planet in recent decades[5], others like the Inuit[6] have had contact for long periods of time and so have adopted technologies beyond those developed locally. These later groups are very much part of the global civilisation and have contributed to the development of new technologies in this civilisation.

In marginal ecosystems hunter-gathering often represents the only feasible way of producing food. The desert is too dry for sustained agriculture and the arctic too cold. The only other possibility is pastoralism, the reliance on semi-domesticated animals as a food source. For instance in the Scandinavian arctic the Sami[7] control the movement of huge reindeer herds to provide a regular food source.

Hunter gathers survive on the food they hunt and gather. This requires very low population densities as population growth is limited by the need to avoid over hunting. Too much gathering of food plants can also serve to reduce the number of plants that are available in the future. This is the core problem with the primitivist idea that the whole planet could live as hunter gathers, there is not nearly enough food produced in natural ecosystems for even a fraction of the current population of the world to do so.

It should be obvious that the amount of calories available to humans as food in an acre of oak forest will be a lot lower then the amount of calories available to humans in an acre of corn. Agriculture provides far, far more useful calories per acre then hunter gathering in the same acre would. That is because we have spent 12,000 years selecting plants and improving agricultural techniques so that per acre we cram in lots of productive plants that put their energy into producing plant parts that are food for us rather then plant parts that are not food for us. Compare any cultivated grain with its wild relative and you will see an illustration of this, the cultivated form will have much bigger grains and a much larger proportion of grain to stalk and foliage. We have chosen plants that produce a high ratio of edible biomass.

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[5]   www.guardian.co.uk
[6]   www.heritage.nf.ca
[7]   www.yukoncollege.yk.ca

In other words a pine tree may be as good or better then a lettuce at capturing the solar energy that falls on it. But with the lettuce a huge percentage of the captured energy goes into food (around 75%). With pine tree none of the energy produces food we can eat. Compare the amount of food to be found in a nearby woodland with the amount you can grow in a couple of square meters of garden cultivated in even an organic low energy fashion and you'll see why agriculture is a must have for the population of the planet. An acre of organically grown potato can yield 15,000 lbs of food[8]. A a square that is 70 yards wide and 70 yards long measures just over an acre.

The estimated population of human on the earth before the advent of agriculture (10,000 BC) varies with some estimates as low as 250,000[9]. Other estimates for the pre-agricultural hunter gather population are more generous, in the range of 6 to 10 million[10]. The earth's current population is over 6,000 million.

This 6,000 million are almost all supported by agriculture. They could not be supported by hunter gathering, indeed it is suggested that even the 10 million hunter gathers who may have existed before agriculture may have been a non sustainable number. Evidence for this can be seen in the Pleistocene overkill[11], a period from 12,000 to 10,000 BC in which 200 genera of large mammals went extinct. In the Americas in this period over 80% of the population of large mammals became extinct[12]. That this was due to over hunting is one controversial hypothesis. If correct than the advent of agriculture (and civilisation) may even have been due to the absence of large game which forced hunter gathers to 'settle down' and find other ways of obtaining food.

Certainly in recorded history the same over hunting has been observed with the arrival of man on isolated Polynesian islands. Over hunting caused the extinction of the Dodo in Mauretania and the Moa in New Zealand not to mention many less famous species.

## Living in the bog in winter

Another way of looking at the fact that primitivism cannot support all of the people of the planet is more anecdotal and uses Ireland [libcom — where the author lives, though figures for the UK are comparable, though even less

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[8]    www.gardensofeden.org
[9]    biology.queensu.ca
[10]   qrc.depaul.edu
[11]   geography.berkeley.edu
[12]   qrc.depaul.edu

favourable for would-be hunter-gatherers] as an example. Left to itself the Irish countryside would consist mostly of mature oak forest with some hazel scrub and bogs. Go into an oak forest and see how much food you can gather — if you know your stuff there is some. Acorns, fruit on brambles in clearings, some wild garlic, strawberries, edible fungi, wild honey, and the meat from animals like deer, squirrel, wild goat and pigeon that can be hunted. But this is much, much, much fewer calories then the same area cultivated as wheat or potatoes would yield. There is simply not enough land in Ireland to support 5 million, the current population of the island, as hunter gatherers.

Typically hunter gatherers live at a population density of 1 per 10 square km. (Irelands present population density is around 500 per 10 square km or 500 times this [libcom — for the UK this is nearly 2,500 times this, 2,460 per 10 square km]). By extending this standard calculation from elsewhere on the planet the number that could be supported in Ireland would be less then 70,000. Probably a lot less as only 20% of Ireland is arable land. Blanket bog or Burren karst provide little in the way of food useful for humans. In winter there would be very little food to be gathered (perhaps small caches of nuts hidden by squirrels and some wild honey) and that even 70,000 people living off hunting would eradicate the large mammals (deer, wild goat) very quickly. The coastal areas and larger rivers and lakes would be the main source of hunting and some gathering in the form of shellfish and edible seaweed.

But being generous and multiplying the typical hunter gatherers population density by 10, and assuming that somehow Ireland could sustain 70,000 hunter gatherers we discover we need to 'reduce' the population by some 4,930,000. Or 98.6% [libcom note — for the UK these figures are even worse — a generous maximum of 240,000 people out of 60m, thus requiring a 99.6% reduction in population]. The actual archaeological estimates for the population of Ireland before the arrival of agriculture is around 7,000 people.

The idea that a certain amount of land can support a certain amount of people according to how it is (or in this case is not) cultivated is referred to as its 'carrying capacity'. This can be estimated for the earth as a whole. One modern calculation for hunter gatherers actually give you 100 million as the maximum figure but just how much of a maximum this is becomes clear when you realise that using similar methods gives 30 billion as the maximum farming figure[13]. That would be five times the world's current population!

But let's take this figure of 100 million as the maximum rather then the historical maximum of 10 million. This is generous estimate, well above that of those primitivists who have dared to address this issue. For instance Miss Ann Thropy

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[13]    Google cache page **www.google.ie**: (sorry but the page is not directly accessible)

writing in the US Earth First! magazine estimated, "Ecotopia would be a planet with about 50 million people who are hunting and gathering for subsistence."[14]

The earth population today is around 6,000 million. A return to a 'primitive' earth therefore requires that some 5900 million people disappear. Something has to happen to 98% of the world's population in order for the 100 million survivors to have even the slightest hope of a sustainable primitive utopia.

## Dirty tricks?

At this point some primitivist writers like John Moore cry foul, dismissing the suggestion "that the population levels envisaged by anarcho-primitivists would have to be achieved by mass die-offs or nazi-style death camps. These are just smear tactics. The commitment of anarcho-primitivists to the abolition of all power relations, including the State with all its administrative and military apparatus, and any kind of party or organisation, means that such orchestrated slaughter remains an impossibility as well as just plain horrendous."[15]

The problem for John is that these 'smear tactics' are based not only on the logical requirements of a primitivist world but are also explicitly acknowledged by other primitivists. Miss Ann Thropy's 50 million has already been quoted. Another primitivist FAQ claims "Drastic population reductions are going to happen whether we do it voluntarily or not. It would be better, for obvious reasons to do all this gradually and voluntarily, but if we don't the human population is going to be cut anyway."[16]

The Coalition Against Civilisation write "We need to be realistic about what would happen were we to enter a post-civilised world. One basic write-off is that a lot of people would die upon civil collapse. While being a hard thing to argue to a moralistic person, we shouldn't pretend this wouldn't be the case."[17]

More recently Derrick Jensen in an interview from Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*[18] said civilisation "needs to be actively fought against, but I don't think that we can bring it down. What we can do is assist the natural world to bring it

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[14] "Miss Ann Thropy," *Earth First!* Dec. 22, 1987, cited at **www.processedworld.com**
[15] **www.eco-action.org**
[16] **www.libcom.org.uk**

**www.eco-action.org**
[17] *The Practical Anarcho-Primitivist: actualizing the implications of a critique* — Coalition Against Civilisation — **www.coalitionagainstcivilisation.org**
[18] Issue #6 of *The 'A' Word Magazine*, this interview online on infoshop: **www.infoshop.org**

down . . . I want civilisation brought down and I want it brought down now." We have seen above what the consequences of 'bringing down' civilisation are.

In short there is no shortage of primitivists who recognise that the primitive world they desire would require "mass die-offs". I've not come across any who advocate "nazi-style death camps" but perhaps John just threw this in to muddy the water. Primitivists like John Moore can therefore refuse to confront this question of die off by upping the emotional ante and by accusing those who point the need for die-off out as carrying out 'smear tactics'. It's up to him to explain either how 6 billion can be fed or to admit that primitivism is no more then an intellectual mind game.

My expectation is that just about everyone when confronted with this requirement of mass death will conclude that 'primitivism' offers nothing to fight for. A very few, like the survivalists confronted by the threat of nuclear war in the 1980's, might conclude that all this is inevitable and start planning how their loved ones will survive when others die. But this latter group has moved far, far beyond any understanding of anarchism as I understand it. So the 'anarcho' prefix such primitivists try to claim has to be rejected.

Most primitivists run away from the requirement for mass death in one of two ways. The more cuddly ones decide that primitivism is not a program for a different way of running the world. Rather it exists as a critique of civilisation and not an alternative to it. This is fair enough and there is a value in re-examining the basic assumptions of civilisation. But in that case primitivism is no substitute for the anarchist struggle for liberation, which involves adapting technology to our needs rather then rejecting it. The problem is that primitivists like to attack the very methods of mass organisation that are necessary for overthrowing capitalism. Reasonable enough if you believe you have an alternative to anarchism but rather damaging if all you have is an interesting critique!

Other primitivists however take the Cassandra path, telling us they are merely prophets of an inevitable doom. They don't desire the death of 5,900 million they just point out it cannot be prevented. This is worth examining in some detail precisely because it is so disempowering. What after all is the use of fighting for a fair society today if tomorrow or the day after 98% if us are going to die and everything we have built crumble to dust?

## Are we all doomed?

Primitivists are not the only ones to use the rhetoric of catastrophe to panic people into accepting their political proposals. Reformists such as George Monbiot, use similar 'we are all doomed' arguments to try and stampede people into support

for reformism and world government. In the last decade's acceptance that the world is somehow doomed has become part of mainstream culture, first as the Cold War and then as looming environmental disaster. George Bush and Tony Blair created a panic over "Weapons of Mass Destruction" to give cover to their invasion of Iraq. The need to examine and dismantle such panics is clear.

The most convincing form the 'end of civilisation' panic takes is the idea of a looming resource crisis that will make life as we know it impossible. And the best resource to focus on for those who wish to make this argument is oil. Everything we produce, including food, is dependant on massive energy inputs and 40% of the world's energy use is generated from oil.

The primitivist version of this argument goes something like this, 'everyone knows that in X number of year the oil will run out, this will mean civilisation will grind to a halt, and this will mean lots of people will die. So we might as well embrace the inevitable'. The oil running out argument is the primitivist equivalent of the orthodox Marxist 'final economic crisis that results in the overthrow of capitalism'. And, just like the orthodox Marxists, primitivists always argue this final crisis is always just around the corner.

When looked at in any detail this argument evaporates and it becomes clear that neither capitalism nor civilisation face a final crisis because of the oil running out. This is not because oil supplies are inexhaustible, indeed we may be reaching or have reached the peak of oil production today. But far from being the end of capitalism or civilisation this is an opportunity for profit and restructuring. Capital however reluctantly, is gearing up to make profits out of developing alternative energy sources on the one hand and on the other of accessing plentiful but more destructive ways to extract fossil fuel supplies. The second path of course makes global warming and other forms of pollution a lot worse but that's not likely to stop the global capitalist class.

It is not just primitivists who have become mesmerised by the oil crisis, but in summary, while oil will become more expensive over the decades the process to develop substitutes for it is already underway. Denmark for instance intends to produce 50% of its energy needs from wind farms by 2030 and Danish companies are already making vast amounts of money because they are the leading producers of wind turbines. The switch over from oil is likely to provide an opportunity to make profits for capitalism rather then representing some form of final crisis.

There may well be an energy crisis as oil starts to rise in price and alternative technologies are not yet capable of filling the 40% of energy generation filled by oil. This will cause oil and therefore energy prices to soar but this will be a crisis for the poor of the world and not for the wealthy some of whom will even profit from it. A severe energy crisis could trigger a global economic downturn but again it is the world's workers that suffer the most in such times. There is a good

argument that the world's elite are already preparing for such a situation, many of the recent US wars make sense in terms of securing future oil supplies for US corporations.

Capitalism is quite capable of surviving very destructive crisis. World War II saw many of the major cities of Europe destroyed and most of the industry of central Europe flattened. (By bombers, by war, by retreating Germans and then torn up and shipped east by advancing Russians). Millions of European workers died as a result both in the war years and in the years that followed. But capitalism not only survived, it flourished as starvation allowed wages to be driven down and profits soared.

## What if?

However it is worth doing a little mental exercise on this idea of the oil running out. If indeed there was no alternative what might happen? Would a primitivist utopia emerge even at the bitter price of 5,900 million people dying?

No. The primitivists seem to forget that we live in a class society. The population of the earth is divided into a few people with vast resources and power and the rest of us. It is not a case of equal access to resources, rather of quite incredible unequal access. Those who fell victim to the mass die off would not include Rubert Murdoch, Bill Gates or George Bush because these people have the money and power to monopolise remaining supplies for themselves.

Instead the first to die in huge number would be the population of the poorer mega cities on the planet. Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt have a population of around 20 million between them. Egypt is dependent both on food imports and on the very intensive agriculture of the Nile valley and the oasis. Except for the tiny wealthy elite those 20 million urban dwellers would have nowhere to go and there is no more land to be worked. Current high yields are in part dependent on high inputs of cheap energy.

The mass deaths of millions of people is not something that destroys capitalism. Indeed at periods of history it has been seen as quite natural and even desirable for the modernisation of capital. The potato famine of the 1840's that reduced the population of Ireland by 30% was seen as desirable by many advocates of free trade[19]. So was the 1943/4 famine in British ruled Bengal in which four million died[20]. For the capitalist class such mass deaths, particularly in colonies,

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[19]   struggle.ws
[20]   www.abc.net.au

afford opportunities to restructure the economy in ways that would otherwise be resisted.

The real result of an 'end of energy' crisis would see our rulers stock piling what energy sources remained and using them to power the helicopter gunships that would be used to control those of us fortunate enough to be selected to toil for them in the biofuel fields. The unlucky majority would just be kept where they are and allowed to die off. More of the 'Matrix' than utopia in other words.

The other point to be made here is that destruction can serve to regenerate capitalism. Like it or not large scale destruction allows some capitalist to make a lot of money. Think of the Iraq war. The destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure may be a disaster for the people of Iraq buts it's a profit making bonanza for Halliburton and co.[21]. Not coincidentally the Iraq war is helping the USA, where the largest corporations are based, gain control of the parts of the planet where much future and current oil production takes place.

We can extend our intellectual exercise still further. Let us pretend that some anarchists are magically transported from the Earth to some Earth-like planet elsewhere. And we are dumped there without any technology at all. The few primitivists amongst us might head off to run with the deer but a fair percentage would sit down and set about trying to create an anarchist civilisation. Many of the skills we could bring might not be that useful (programming without computers is of little use) but between us we'd have a good basic knowledge of agriculture, engineering, hydraulics and physics. Next time the primitivists wandered through the area we settled they'd find a landscape of farms and dams.

We'd at least have wheeled carts and possibly draft animals if any of the large game were suitable for domestication. We'd send out parties looking for obvious sources of coal and iron and if we found these we'd mine and transport them. If not we'd be felling a lot of lumber to turn into charcoal to extract whatever iron or copper we could from what could be found. The furnace and the smelter would also be found on that landscape. We'd have some medical knowledge, most importantly an understanding of germs and medical hygiene so we'd have both basic water purification and sewage removal systems.

We'd understand the importance of knowledge so we'd have an education system for our children and at least the beginnings of a long-term store of knowledge (books). We could probably find the ingredients for gunpowder, which are quite common, which would give us the blasting technology need for large-scale mining and construction. If there was any marble nearby we could make concrete, which is a much better building material then wood or mud.

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[21]  For a reasoned critique of collapism from a Green anarchist perspective see **pub47.ezboard.com**

Technology did not come from the gods. It was not imposed on man by a mysterious outside force. Rather it is something we developed and continue to develop. Even if you could turn the clock back it would just start ticking again. John Zerzan seems to be the only primitivist capable of acknowledging this and he retreats to the position of seeing language and abstract thought as the problem. He is both right and ludicrous at the same time. His vision of utopia requires not only the death of the mass of the world's population but would require the genetically engineered lobotomy of those who survive and their offspring! Not of course something he advocates but a logical end point of his argument.

## Why argue against it?

So why spend so much space demolishing such a fragile ideology as primitivism. One reason is the embarrassing connection with anarchism some primitivists seek to claim. More importantly primitivism both by implication and often in its calls wants its followers to reject rationalism for mysticism and oneness with nature. They are not the first irrational ecological movement to do so, a good third of the German Nazi party came from forest-worshipping blood and soil movements that sprung up in Germany in the aftermath of World War I.

This is not an empty danger. Within primitivism a self-proclaimed irrational wing has developed that if not yet advocating "nazi-style death camps" has openly celebrated the deaths and murder of large numbers of people as a first step.

In December 1997 the US publication *Earth First* wrote that "the AIDS epidemic, rather than being a scourge, is a welcome development in the inevitable reduction of human population."[22] Around the same period in Britain Steve Booth, one of the editors of a magazine called 'Green Anarchist ', wrote that

> "The Oklahoma bombers had the right idea. The pity was that they did not blast any more government offices. Even so, they did all they could and now there are at least 200 government automatons that are no longer capable of oppression. The Tokyo sarin cult had the right idea. The pity was that in testing the gas a year prior to the attack, they gave themselves away. They were not secretive enough. They had the technology to produce the gas but the method of delivery was ineffective. One day the groups will be totally secretive and their methods of fumigation will be completely effective."[23]

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[22] *Earth First!*, Dec. 22, 1987, cited at **www.processedworld.com**
[23] *Green Anarchist*, number 51, page 11, a defence of these remarks was published in Number 52. The author Steve Booth was a *GA* editor (and the treasurer) at the time.

This is where you end up when you celebrate spirituality over rationality. When the hope of 'running with deer' overcomes the need to deal with the problem of making a revolution on a planet of 6 billion people. The ideas above have only reactionary conclusions. Their logic is elitist and hierarchical, little more that a semi-secular version of gods chosen people laying waste to the unbelievers. It certainly has nothing in common with anarchism. We need more not less technology.

Which brings us back to the start. Civilisation comes with many, many problems but it is better than the alternative. The challenge for anarchists is in transforming civilisation to a form that is without hierarchy, or imbalances of power or wealth. This is not a new challenge, it has always been the challenge of anarchism as shown by the lengthy Bakunin quotation at the start of this essay.

To do this we need modern technology to clean our water, pump away and process our waste and inoculate or cure people of the diseases of high population density. With only 10 million people on the earth you can shit in the woods providing you keep moving on. With 6 billion those who shit in the woods are shitting in the water they and those around them will have to drink. According to the UN "each year, more than 2.2 million people die from water and sanitation related diseases, many of them children". Close to one billion urban dwellers have no access to sustainable sanitation. Data for "43 African cities . . . shows that 83 percent of the population do not have toilets connected to sewers"[24].

The challenge then is not simply the construction of a civilisation that keeps everyone's standards of living at the level they are now. The challenge is raising just about everyone's standard of living but doing so in a manner that is reasonably sustainable. Only the further development of technology coupled to a revolution that eliminates inequality across the planet can deliver this.

It is unfortunate that some anarchists who live in the most developed, most wealthy and most technological nations of the world prefer to play with primitivism than getting down to thinking about how we can really change the world. The global transformation required will make all previous revolutions fade into insignificance.

The major problem is not simply that capitalism has been happy to leave a huge proportion of the world's population in poverty. The problem is also that development has been aimed at creating consumers for future products rather then providing what people need.

As long as capitalism exists it will continue to wreak environmental havoc as it chases profits. It will only effectively respond to the energy crisis once that becomes profitable and because there will be a lag of many years before oil can

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[24] www.unhabitat.org

be replaced this might mean worsening poverty and death for many of the poorer people in the world. But we cannot fix these problems by dreaming of some lost golden age when the world's population was low enough to support hunter gathering. We can only sort it out by building the sort of mass movements that can not only overthrow capitalism but also introduce a libertarian society. And on the way we need to find ways to halt and even reverse some of the worst of the environmental threats capitalism is generating.

Primitivism is a pipe dream — it offers no way forwards in the struggle for a free society. Often its adherents end up undermining that struggle by attacking the very things, like mass organisation, that are a requirement to win it. Those primitivists who are serious about changing the world need to re-examine what they are fighting for.

## Libcom Summary

1. Primitivism is such a ridiculous idea it should not even need arguing against, although unfortunately within anarchist circle it does.
2. Abolishing technology would have catastrophic consequences for the planet in terms of nuclear waste leakage, and on ill or disabled people, not to mention general quality of life.
3. Hunter-gathering could only feed an absolute maximum of 100m people, thereby necessitating a reduction of population of 5,900m people. Primitivists cannot explain how this will come about.
4. Even if there were ecological disaster or mass human die-off it would not destroy capitalism or class society, it would simply be used by capital as an opportunity to restructure, and ensure the class divide stays intact.
5. There is nothing inherently wrong with technology, it just depends on how it is applied — in a free society they can be used to increase freedom (from onerous work, or physical disability etc.).
6. To protect the planet we do not to get rid of technology, only of the wasteful and destructive system of capitalism which places profit above all else. To do that we need mass working class organisations which can protect our conditions, and our planet, and eventually run society on the basis of co-operation, not profit.

# More information

*Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism — An Unbridgeable Chasm*, by Murray Bookchin. See especially chapters 6 and 7.