The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012

David Watson
Civilization in Bulk
1991

Footnotes available from *Fifth Estate* Summer 1991, pp. 40–4
Retrieved on July 26, 2009 from www.insurgentdesire.org.uk

David Watson

Civilization in Bulk

1991

primal peoples than to the hollow advertising claims of the industrial system: the plants disappearing and the animals dying, the soils denuded along with the human spirit, vast oceans poisoned, the very rain turned corrosive and deadly, human communities at war with one another over diminishing spoils — and all poised on the brink of an even greater annihilation at the push of a few buttons within reach of stunted, half-dead head-zeks in fortified bunkers. Civilization's railroad leads not only to ecocide, but to evolutionary suicide. Every empire lurches toward the oblivion it fabricates and will eventually be covered with sand. Can a world worth inhabiting survive the ruin that will be left?

Thus, as Fredy Perlman argued, imperialism is far from being the last stage of civilization but is embedded in the earliest stages of the state and class society. So there is always a brutal frontier where there is empire and always empire where there is civilization. The instability and rapidity of change as well as the violence and destructiveness of the change both belie empire's claim to natural legitimacy, suggesting once more an evolutionary wrong turn, a profoundly widening disequilibrium.

The frontier expands along two intersecting axes, centrifugal and centripetal. In the words of Stanley Diamond, "Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home. Each is an aspect of the other." Thus outwardly, empire is expressed geographically (northern Canada, Malaysia, the Amazon, etc.; the ocean bottoms, even outer space) and biospherically (disruption of weather and climate, vast chemical experiments on the air and water, elimination and simplification of ecosystems, genetic manipulation).

But the process is replicated internally on the human spirit: every zek finds an empire in miniature "wired" to the very nervous system.

So, too, is repression naturalized, the permanent crisis in character and the authoritarian plague legitimated. It starts with frightened obedience to the archon or patriarch, then moves by way of projection to a violent, numbed refusal of the living subjectivity and integrity of the other — whether found in nature, in woman, or in conquered peoples.

At one end of the hierarchic pyramid stands unmitigated power; at the other, submission mingles with isolation, fragmentation and rage. All is justified, by the ideology of Progress — conquest and subjugation of peoples, ruin of lands and sacrifice zones for the empire, self-repression, mass addiction to imperial spoils, the materialization of culture. Ideology keeps the work and war machines operating.

Ultimately, this vortex brings about the complete objectification of nature. Every relationship is increasingly instrumentalized and technicized. Mechanization and industrialization have rapidly transformed the planet, exploding ecosystems and human communities with monoculture, industrial degradation and mass markets. The world now corresponds more closely to the prophetic warnings of

Contents

> "He might think of it as a worm, a giant worm, not a living worm but a carcass of a worm, a monstrous cadaver, its body consisting of numerous segments, its skin pimpled with spears and wheels and other technological implements. He knows from his own experience that the entire carcass is brought to artificial life by the motions of the human beings trapped inside, the zeks who operate the springs and wheels, just as he knows that the cadaverous head is operated by a mere zek, the head zek."

It is no accident that Fredy chose the word zek, a word meaning gulag prisoner that he found in Solzhenitsyn's work. It was not only to emphasize that civilization has been a labor camp from its origins, but to illuminate the parallels between the ancient embryonic forms and the modern global work machine presently suffocating the earth. While the differences in magnitude and historical development are great enough to account for significant contrasts, essential elements shared by both systems — elements outlined above — position both civilizations in a polarity with primal community. At one extreme stands organic community: an organism, in the form of a circle, a web woven into the fabric of nature. At the other is civilization: no longer an organism but organic fragments reconstituted as a machine, an organization; no longer a circle but a rigid pyramid of crushing hierarchies; not a web but a grid expanding the territory of the inorganic.

According to official history, this grid is the natural outcome of an inevitable evolution. Thus natural history is not a multiverse of potentialities but rather a linear progression from Prometheus' theft of fire to the International Monetary Fund. A million and more years of species life experienced in organic communities are dismissed as a kind of waiting period in anticipation of the few thousand years of imperial grandeur to follow. The remaining primal societies, even now being dragged by the hair into civilization's orbit along its blood-drenched frontier, are dismissed as living fossils ("lacking in evolutionary promise," as one philosopher characterized them), awaiting their glorious inscription into the wondrous machine.

The crystallization of a fluid, organic community into a pseudo-community, a giant machine, was in fact the first machine, the standard definition of which, Mumford notes, is "a combination of resistant parts, each specialized in function, operating under human control, to utilize energy and perform work." Thus, he argues, "The two poles of civilization then, are mechanically-organized work and mechanically-organized destruction and extermination. Roughly the same forces and the same methods of operation [are] applicable to both areas." In Mumford's view, the greatest legacy of this system has been "the myth of the machine" — the belief that it is both irresistible and ultimately beneficial. This mechanization of human beings, he writes, "had long preceded the mechanization of their working instruments. But once conceived, this new mechanism spread rapidly, not just by being imitated in self-defense, but by being forcefully imposed."

One can see the differences here between the kind of technics embedded in an egalitarian society and technics-as-power or technology. As Mumford argues, people "of ordinary capacity, relying on muscle power and traditional skills alone, were capable of performing a wide variety of tasks, including pottery and manufacture and weaving, without any external direction or scientific guidance, beyond that available in the tradition of the local community. Not so with the megamachine. Only kings, aided by the discipline of astronomical science and supported by the sanctions of religion, had the capacity of assembling and directing the megamachine. This was an invisible structure composed of living, but rigid, human parts, each assigned to his special office, role, and task, to make possible the immense work-output and grand designs of this great collective organization."

Civilization as Gulag

In his intuitive history of the megamachine, Fredy Perlman describes how a Sumerian "Ensi" or overseer, lacking the rationalizations of the ideology of Progress which are routinely used to vaccinate us against our wildness, might see the newly issued colossus:

Having had the privilege of living for a time among stone age peoples of Brazil, a very civilized European of considerable erudition wrote afterwards, "Civilization is no longer a fragile flower, to be carefully preserved and reared with great difficulty here and there in sheltered corners. All that is over: humanity has taken to monoculture, once and for all, and is preparing to produce civilization in bulk, as if it were sugar-beet. The same dish will be served to us every day."

Those words were written in 1955. Now that civilization is engulfing the entire planet, the image of the fragile flower has largely wilted. Some of civilization's inmates are remembering that the image was always a lie; other ways of seeing the world are being rediscovered. Counter-traditions are being reexamined, escape routes devised, weapons fashioned. To put it another way, a spectre haunts the heavy equipment as it chugs deeper into the morass it has made: the spectre of the primal world.

Devising escapes and weapons is no simple task: false starts and poor materials. The old paths are paved and the materials that come from the enemy's arsenal tend to explode in our hands. Memory and desire have been suppressed and deformed; we have all been inculcated in the Official History. Its name is Progress, and the Dream of Progress continues to fuel global civilization's expansion everywhere, converting human beings into mechanized, self-obliterating puppets, nature into dead statuary.

The Official History can be found in every child's official history text: Before the genesis (which is to say, before civilization), there was nothing but a vast, oceanic chaos, dark and terrible, brutish and nomadic, a bloody struggle for existence. Eventually, through great effort by a handful of men, some anonymous, some celebrated, humanity emerged from the slime, from trees, caves, tents and endless wanderings in a sparse and perilous desert to accomplish fantastic improvements in life. Such improvements came through mastery of animals, plants and minerals; the exploitation of hitherto neglected Resources; the fineries of high culture and religion; and the miracles of technics in the service of centralized authority.

This awe-inspiring panoply of marvels took shape under the aegis of the city-state and behind its fortified walls. Through millenia,

civilization struggled to survive amid a storm of barbarism, resisting being swallowed by the howling wilderness. Then another "Great Leap Forward" occurred among certain elect and anointed kingdoms of what came to be called "the West," and the modern world was born: the enlightenment of scientific reason ushered in exploration and discovery of the wilderness, internal (psychic) and external (geographic). In the kingdom's official murals, the Discoverers appear at one end, standing proudly on their ships, telescopes and sextants in their hands; at the other end waits the world, a sleeping beauty ready to awake and join her powerful husband in the marriage bed of nature and reason.

Finally come the offspring of this revolution: invention, mechanization, industrialization, and ultimately scientific, social and political maturity, a mass democratic society and mass-produced abundance. Certainly, a few bugs remain to be worked out — ubiquitous contamination, runaway technology, starvation and war (mostly at the uncivilized "peripheries"), but civilization cherishes its challenges, and expects all such aberrations to be brought under control, rationalized through technique, redesigned to "serve human needs," forever and ever, amen. History is a gleaming locomotive running on rails — albeit around precarious curves and through some foreboding tunnels — to the Promised Land. And whatever the dangers, there can be no turning back.

A False Turn

But now that several generations have been raised on monoculture's gruel, civilization is coming to be regarded not as a promise yet to be fulfilled so much as a maladaption of the species, a false turn or a kind of fever threatening the planetary web of life. As one of History's gentle rebels once remarked, "We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us." The current crisis, occurring on every level, from the ecospheric to the social to the personal, has become too manifest, too grievous, to ignore. The spectre haunting modern civilization, once only a sense of loss, now has open partisans who have undertaken the theoretical and practical critique of civilization.

What were once mutualities became hierarchies. In this transformation, gift exchange disappears; gift exchange with nature disappears with it. What was shared is now hoarded: the mystery to which one once surrendered now becomes a territory to be conquered. All stories of the origins become histories of the origins of the Master. The origin of the World is retold as the origin of the State.

Woman, who through the birth process exemplifies all of nature and who maintains life processes through her daily activities of nurturance of plants, animals and children, is suppressed by the new transformer-hero. Male power, attempting to rival the fecundity of woman, simulates birth and nature's fecundity through the manufacture of artifacts and monuments. The womb — a primordial container, a basket or bowl — is reconstituted by power into the city walls.

"Thus," as Frederick W. Turner puts it in *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, the "rise to civilization' might be seen not so much as the triumph of a progressive portion of the race over its lowly, nature-bound origins as a severe, aggressive volteface against all unimproved nature, the echoes of which would still be sounding millennia later when civilized men once again encountered the challenges of the wilderness beyond their city walls."

No explanation and no speculation can encompass the series of events that burst community and generated class society and the state. But the result is relatively clear: the institutionalization of hierarchic elites and the drudgery of the dispossessed to support them, monoculture to feed their armed gangs, the organization of society into work battalions, hoarding, taxation and economic relations, and the reduction of the organic community to lifeless resources to be mined and manipulated by the archon and his institutions.

The "chief features" of this new state society, writes Mumford, "constant in varying proportions throughout history, are the centralization of political power, the separation of classes, the lifetime division of labor, the mechanization of production, the magnification of military power, the economic exploitation of the weak, and the universal introduction of slavery and forced labor for both industrial and military purposes." In other words, a megamachine made up of two major arms, a labor machine and a military machine.

of that labor, what has come to pass is that society has been divided into rulers and ruled, masters and subjects. The political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation. Alienation is political before it is economic; power precedes labor; the economic derives from the political; the emergence of the State determines the advent of classes."

The emergence of authority, production and technology are all moments within the same process. Previously, power resided in no separate sphere, but rather within the circle — a circle that included the human community and nature (nonhuman kin). "Production" and the "economic" were undivided as well; they were embedded in the circle through gift sharing which transcends and neutralizes the artifactuality or "thingness" of the objects passing from person to person. (Animals, plants and natural objects being persons, even kin, subsistence is therefore neither work nor production, but rather gift, drama, reverence, reverie.) Technique also had to be embedded in relations between kin, and thus open, participatory, and accessible to all; or it was entirely personal, singular, visionary, unique and untransferable.

Equilibrium Exploded

The "great affinity of power and nature," as Clastres puts it, explains the deep cleft between them when power divides and polarizes the community. For the primal community, to follow Mircea Eliade's reasoning, "The world is at once 'open' and mysterious. 'Nature' at once unveils and 'camouflages' the 'supernatural' [which] constitutes the basic and unfathomable mystery of the World." Mythic consciousness apprehends and intervenes in the world, participates in it, but this does not necessitate a relation of domination; it "does not mean that one has transformed [cosmic realities] into 'objects of knowledge.' These realities still keep their original ontological condition."

The trauma of disequilibrium exploded what contemporary pagan feminists have called "power within" and generated "power over."

So we begin by reexamining our list of chapters not from the point of view of the conquerors but the conquered: the slaves crushed under temple construction sites or gassed in the trenches, the dredged and shackled rivers, the flattened forests, the beings pinned to laboratory tables. What voice can better speak for them than the primal? Such a critique of "the modern world through Pleistocene eyes," such a "geological kind of perspective," as the indigenous authors of the 1977 Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) document, *A Basic Call to Consciousness*, put it, immediately explodes the conquerors Big Lie about "underdevelopment" and the "brutality" of primal society, their vilification of prehistory.

The lie has most recently been eroded not only by greater access to the views of primal peoples and their native descendants who are presently fighting for survival, but by a more critical, non-eurocentric anthropology willing to challenge its own history, premises and privilege. Primal society, with its myriad variations, is the common heritage of all peoples. From it, we can infer how human beings lived some 99 percent of our existence as a species. (And even a large part of that last one percent consists of the experience of tribal and other vernacular communities that resist conquest and control in creative, if idiosyncratic ways.)

Looking with new/old eyes on the primal world, we see a web of autonomous societies, splendidly diverse but sharing certain characteristics. Primal society has been called "the original affluent society," affluent because its needs are few, all its desires are easily met. Its tool kit is elegant and lightweight, its outlook linguistically complex and conceptually profound yet simple and accessible to all. Its culture is expansive and ecstatic. It is propertyless and communal, egalitarian and cooperative. Like nature, it is essentially leaderless: neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, it is anarchic, which is to say that no archon or ruler has built and occupied center stage. It is, rather, an organic constellation of persons, each unique.

A Society Free of Work

It is also a society free of work; it has no economy or production per se, except for gift exchange and a kind of ritual play that also happen to create subsistence (though it is a society capable of experiencing occasional hunger without losing its spiritual bearings, even sometimes choosing hunger to enhance interrelatedness, to play or to see visions). The Haudenosaunee, for example, write that "[we] do not have specific economic institutions, nor do we have specifically distinct political institutions." Furthermore, the subsistence activities of Haudenosaunee society, "by our cultural definition, [are] not an economy at all."

Hence, primal society's plenitude resides in its many symbolic, personal, and natural relationships, not in artifacts. It is a dancing society, a singing society, a celebrating society, a dreaming society. Its philosophy and practice of what is called *animisma mythopoetic* articulation of the organic unity of life discovered only recently by the West's ecologists — protects the land by treating its multiplicity of forms as sacred beings, each with its own integrity and subjectivity. Primal society affirms community with all of the natural and social world.

Somehow this primal world, a world (as Lewis Mumford has observed) more or less corresponding to the ancient vision of the Golden Age, unravels as the institutions of kingship and class society emerge. How it happened remains unclear to us today. Perhaps we will never fully understand the mystery of that original mutation from egalitarian to state society. Certainly, no standard explanations are adequate. "That radical discontinuity," in the words of Pierre Clastres, "that mysterious emergence — irreversible, fatal to primitive societies — of the thing we know by the name of the State," how does it occur?

Primal society maintained its equilibrium and its egalitarianism because it refused power, refused property. Kingship could not have emerged from the chief because the chief had no power over others. Clastres insists: "Primitive society is the place where separate power is refused, because the society itself, and not the chief, is the real locus of power."

It is possible that we could approach this dissolution of original community appropriately only by way of mythic language like the Old Ones would have used. After all, only a poetic story could vividly express such a tragic loss of equilibrium. The latent potentiality for power and technique to emerge as separate domains had been previously kept at bay by the gift cycle, "techniques of the sacred" and the high level of individuation of society's members.

Primal peoples, according to Clastres, "had a very early premonition that power's transcendence conceals a mortal risk for the group, that the principle of an authority which is external and the creator of its own legality is a challenge to culture itself. It is the intuition of this threat that determined the depth of their political philosophy. For, on discovering the great affinity of power and nature, as the twofold limitation on the domain of culture, Indian societies were able to create a means for neutralizing the virulence of political authority."

This, in effect, is the same process by which primal peoples neutralized the potential virulence of technique: they minimized the relative weight of instrumental or practical techniques and expanded the importance of techniques of seeing: ecstatic techniques. The shaman is, in Jerome Rotherberg's words, a "technician" of ecstasy, a "protopoet" whose "technique hinges on the creation of special linguistic circumstances, i.e., of song and invocation." Technology, like power, is in such a way refused by the dynamic of primal social relations. But when technique and power emerge as separate functions rather than as strands inextricably woven into the fabric of society, everything starts to come apart. "The unintended excressence that grows out of human communities and then liquidates them," as Fredy Perlman called it, makes its appearance. A sorcery run amok, a golem-like thingness that outlives its fabricators: somehow the gift cycle is ruptured; the hoop, the circle, broken.

The community, as Clastres puts it, "has ceased to exorcise the thing that will be its ruin: power and respect for power." A kind of revolution, or counter-revolution, takes place: "When, in primitive society, the economic dynamic lends itself to definition as a distinct and autonomous domain, when the activity of production becomes alienated, accountable labor, levied by men who will enjoy the fruits