

John Zerzan

**On the Transition: Postscript
to Future Primitive**

“Yeah, the critique is impressive and everything, but just how might we actually get from this ghastly world to some healed, whole existence?”

I think we should not doubt that such a journey is possible, nor that the explosion necessary to begin it may be approaching.

The thought of the dominant culture has, of course, always told us that alienated life is inescapable. In fact, culture or civilization itself expresses this essential dogma: the civilizing process, as Freud noted, is the forcible trading of a free, natural life for one of unceasing repression.

Today culture is in a dispirited, used-up state wherever one looks. More important than the entropy afflicting the logic of culture, however, is what seems to be the active, if inchoate resistance to it. This is the ray of hope that disturbs the otherwise all-too-depressing race we witness to determine whether total alienation or the destruction of the biomass will happen first.

People are being stretched and beaten on the rack of everyday emptiness, and the spell of civilization is fading. Lasch referred to a near-universal rage abroad in society, just under the surface. It is growing and its symptoms are legion, amounting to a refusal to leave this earth unsatisfied.

Adorno asked, “What would happiness be that was not measured by the immeasurable grief at what is?” Certainly, the condition of life has become nightmarish enough to justify such a question, and perhaps also to suggest that something started to go deeply wrong a very long time back. At least it ought to be demonstrating, moving on toward specifics, that the means of reproducing the prevailing Death Ship (e.g. its technology) cannot be used to fashion a liberated world.

Saul Bellow’s Mr. Sammler wondered, “What is ‘common’ about the common life? What if some genius were to do with ‘common life’ what Einstein did with ‘matter’? Finding its energetics, uncovering its radiance.” Of course, we must all be that ‘Einstein’, which is exactly what will unleash a creative energy sufficient to utterly refashion the conditions of human existence. Ten thousand years of captivity and darkness, to paraphrase Vaneigem, will not withstand ten days of full-out revolution, which will include the simultaneous reconstruction of our inner selves. Who doesn’t hate modern life? Can what conditioning that remains survive such an explosion of life, one that ruthlessly removes the sources of such conditioning?

We are obviously being held hostage by capital and its technology, made to feel dependent, even helpless, by the sheer weight of it all, the massive inertia of centuries of alienated categories, patterns, values. What could be dispensed with immediately? Borders, governments, hierarchy . . . What else? How fast could more deep-seated forms of authority and separation be dissolved, such as that of division of labor? I assert, and not, I hope, in the spirit of wishing to derive blueprints from abstract principle, that I can see no ultimate freedom or

wholeness without the dissolution of the inherent power of specialists of every kind.

Many say that millions would die if the present techno-global fealty to work and the commodity were scrapped. But this overlooks many potentialities. For example, consider the vast numbers of people who would be freed from manipulative, parasitic, destructive pursuits for those of creativity, health, and liberty. At present, in fact, very few contribute in any way to satisfying authentic needs.

Transporting food thousands of miles, not an atypical pursuit today, is an instance of pointless activity, as is producing countless tons of herbicide and pesticide poisons. The picture of humanity starving if a transformation were attempted may be brought into perspective by reference to a few other agricultural specifics, of a more positive nature. It is perfectly feasible, generally speaking, that we grow our own food. There are simple approaches, involving no division of labor, to large yields in small spaces.

Agriculture itself must be overcome, as domestication, and because it removes more organic matter from the soil than it puts back. Permaculture is a technique that seems to attempt an agriculture that develops or reproduces itself and thus tends toward nature and away from domestication. It is one example of promising interim ways to survive while moving away from civilization. Cultivation within the cities is another aspect of practical transition, and a further step toward superseding domestication would be a more or less random propagation of plants, a la Johnny Appleseed.

Regarding urban life, any steps toward autonomy and self-help should be realized, beginning now, so that cities may be all the more quickly abandoned later. Created out of capital's need to centralize control of property transactions, religion, and political domination, cities remain as extended life-destroying monuments to the same basic needs of capital. Something on the order of what we know now as museums might be a good idea so that post-upheaval generations could know how grotesque our species' existence became. Moveable celebration sites may be the nearest configuration to cities that disalienated life will express.

Along with the movement out of cities, paralleling it, one might likely see a movement from colder climes to warmer ones. The heating of living space in northern areas constitutes an absurd effort of energy, resources, and time. When humans become once again intimate with the earth, healthier and more robust, these zones would probably be peopled again, in altogether different ways.

As for population itself, its growth is no more a natural or neutral phenomenon than its technology. When life is fatally out of balance, the urge to reproduce appears as compensation for impoverishment, as with the non-civilized gatherer-hunters surviving today, population levels would be relatively quite low.

Enrico Guidoni pointed out that architectural structures necessarily reveal a great deal about their social context. Similarly, the isolation and sterility of shelter in class society is hardly accidental, and deserves to be scrapped in toto. Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* deals with some examples of shelter produced not by specialists, but by spontaneous and evolving communal activity. Imagine the inviting richness of dwellings, each unique not mass produced, and a part of a serene mutuality that one might expect to emerge from the collapse of boundaries and artificial scarcities, material and emotional.

Probably 'health' in a new world will be a matter even less recognizable than the question of shelter. The dehumanized industrial 'medicine' of today is totally complicitous with the overall processes of society which rob us of life and vitality. Of countless examples of the criminality of the present, direct profiting from human misery must rank near the top. Alternative healing practices are already challenging the dominant mode, but the only real solution is the abolition of a setup that by its very nature spawns an incredible range of physical and psychic immiseration. From Reich to Mailer, for example, cancer is recognized as the growth of a general madness blocked and denied. Before civilization disease was generally nonexistent. How could it have been otherwise? Where else do degenerative and infectious diseases, emotional maladies, and all the rest issue if not from work, toxicity, cities, estrangement, fear, unfulfilled lives — the whole canvas of damaged, alienated reality? Destroying the sources will eradicate the suffering. Minor exigencies would be treated by herbs and the like, not to mention a diet of pure, non-processed food.

It seems evident that industrialization and the factories could not be gotten rid of instantly, but equally clear that their liquidation must be pursued with all the vigor behind the rush of break-out. Such enslavement of people and nature must disappear forever, so that words like production and economy will have no meaning. A graffiti from the rising in France in '68 was simply 'Quick!' Those partisans apparently realized the need to move rapidly forward all the way, with no temporizing or compromise with the old world. Half a revolution would only preserve domination and cement its hold over us.

A qualitatively different life would entail abolishing exchange, in every form, in favor of the gift and the spirit of play. Instead of the coercion of work — and how much of the present could continue without precisely that coercion? — an existence without constraints is an immediate, central objective. Unfettered pleasure, creative endeavor along the lines of Fourier: according to the passions of the individual and in a context of complete equality.

What would we keep? "Labor-saving devices?" Unless they involve no division of labor (e.g. a lever or incline), this concept is a fiction; behind the "saving" is hidden the congealed drudgery of many and the despoliation of the natural world.

As the Parisian group Interrogations put it: “Today’s riches are not human riches; they are riches for capitalism which correspond to a need to sell and stupefy. The products we manufacture, distribute, and administer are the material expressions of our alienation.”

Every kind of fear and doubt is cultivated against the prospect or possibility of transforming life, including the moment of its beginning. “Wouldn’t revolt mean mayhem, hoarding, survivalist violence, etc.?” But popular uprisings seem to embody strong feelings of joy, unity, and generosity. Considering the most recent U.S. examples, the urban insurrections of the ‘60s, New York City ‘77, and Los Angeles ‘92 — one is struck overall by the spontaneous sharing, the sharp drop in interracial violence and violence against women, and even a sense of festival.

Our biggest obstacle lies in forgetting the primacy of the negative. Hesitation, peaceful coexistence — this deficiency of desire will prove fatal if allowed to be ascendent. The truly humanitarian and pacific impulse is that which is committed to relentlessly destroying the malignant dynamic known as civilization, including its roots. Time is a stunting, confining imposition of culture, naming is a domination, like counting, an aspect of the distancing of language. In the horrible extremity of today we can see the need to return all the way to the earth, to the multi-sensual intimacy of nature that obtained before symbolization made living a reified, separated caricature of itself. Enchantment might be savored even more brightly this time, for knowing what our ancestors didn’t realize must be avoided.

Tearing up the concrete could begin immediately, as my late friend Bob Brubaker once counseled. Literally, under the pavement, it’s the beach!

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