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with our senses. Thus they all lead to greater disconnection, and often despair.

The critique of civilization (which could more precisely be called the *nature-based* critique of civilization) does provide a real alternative. That's why it's so dangerous. The meaning of life doesn't require theologians or philosophers. *It doesn't even require language.* You can find it under a rock, in a weedy vacant lot, off the shoulder of the freeway: the larger story in which your life fits, not to go somewhere, but to be home.

Critique of Civilization FAQ

April 8, 2005 (revised October 2006)

What do you mean, "critique of civilization"?

Mostly I mean putting human civilization in context, seeing it from the perspective of the world that surrounds it, instead of through the lens of its own mythology. For example, we're taught to think of human prehistory as a temporary, transitional stage destined to "improve" into a world like our own. In fact, we have lived as forager-hunters for at least 100 times as long as we've been tilling the soil, and it's our own age that shows every sign of being temporary, unstable, and short. The critique of civilization is a reframing, after which "primitive" people seem like the human norm, and civilization seems like a brief failed experiment.

Another example: suppose I broke into your house, killed your family, locked you in a cage, threw out all your stuff, redecorated according to my tastes, and called it "growth" because I used to have one house and now have two, or called it "development" because I replaced your stuff with my own. That's exactly what civilization does, to nature, to nonhumans, to nature-based humans, even to humans in other branches of civilization.

It's not really that bad, is it?

The deserts of central and southwest Asia and the Mediterranean used to be forests. Ancient empires cut them down to burn the wood to smelt metal for weapons, and to build ships, which they used to conquer their neighbors. This has been the pattern of every "successful" civilization in history: to transform the life of the Earth into larger human populations that must conquer and deplete more land to survive, spreading like a cancer over thousands of miles, destroying every habitat and culture in their path, until they go totally mad, exhaust their landbase, and crash.

Can you define "civilization"?

I don't think it's necessary or even helpful to make an airtight definition. I follow William Kötke in using "civilization" interchangeably with "empire." I define it loosely as a self-reinforcing societal

pattern of depletion of the land, accumulation of wealth, conquest, repression, central control, and insulation and disconnection from life, with all of these habits allied to mental, cultural, and physical artifacts.

For example, the plow is a physical artifact that enables the cultural habit of grain farming to take biomass from the soil and convert it into more humans and into stores of grain, which enable the cultural artifact of "wealth," which enables some people to tell others what to do and build the cultural artifact of "command," backed up by physical artifacts like swords and guns and cultural roles like soldiers and police, who reinforce the whole pattern by conquering and holding more land for the plow and more people for the roles of farmer and owner and soldier. Also, farming enables people to lose their awareness of wild nature and still survive — in fact, it links their survival to viewing wild nature as an enemy, which feeds back and supports their habit of exterminating nature.

Or, the car is a physical artifact whose manufacture and use require the land to be torn up for mining (after being conquered), polluted with industrial waste products, and covered with pavement, and the car feeds back into this system by insulating and disconnecting people behind its metal walls and blurring speeds, so they lose touch with their neighbors and with the world they're destroying. Also cars enable us to put more distance between the places we have to go, forcing us to have cars to get there, and thus to do thousands of hours of commanded labor to be permitted to own them.

Sure, everyone knows cars are bad. But what about all the good stuff in civilization, like our medical advances?

Most of industrial medicine exists to treat diseases and injuries that are caused by industrial civilization in the first place, like heart disease and cancer and car crashes, which are rare or nonexistent in nature. And mostly it fails to treat them, and only succeeds in prolonging sickness to increase the power of the medical system and allow it to more completely colonize our lives.

Didn't primitive people live only 30 years, and have lots of health problems?

In metaphysics, the notion that earth and all that's on it is a mental construct is the product of people who spend their lives inside rooms. It is an indoor philosophy. In fact, most interpretations of Gnosticism are far more sophisticated than that. They're also more sophisticated than the simple anti-civ position, that nature is the more-real outside world and civilization (both its mental and physical aspects) is the prison. They might say that the prison includes a certain view of nature, and to get outside it we have to see beyond that, to a spiritual nature that lies deeper, as the ocean underlies its surface. (Here's a discussion of gnosticism and nature on fantastic planet.)

The critique of civilization can enrich gnosticism by contributing powerful stories with hard details about a particular prison, how it was constructed, and how to get out of it. And gnosticism can give something back: a metaphysical explanation for what civilization means and where it came from, a deep story of the origin of this hell-world that speaks of intelligence and intention and not just blind chance. I've read (and written) plenty of speculations about how civilization got started, and the hypothesis that humans have been possessed by life-hating occult entities is not only the most meaningful, but one of the more plausible.

The Meaning of Life. When we ask about "the meaning of life," we are asking for the larger story in which our life fits. Inside civilization, the larger story is "progress." Progress and its corollaries, "growth" and "wealth" and "education" and "upward" social mobility, tell us what makes a meaningful and successful life: a college degree, a professional certification, a clean house in the suburbs, a stock portfolio for retirement, and some personal contribution to humans going somewhere new.

From outside civilization, these are all the vaporous conceits of a pathological culture on the verge of collapse. Of course there are other philosophies that make our accustomed reality seem trivial — there's Cartesian nihilism, that we are just a bunch of dead bouncing particles and waves, and there's the astronomy cliche that we're just parasites on a speck of dust in the vastness of the cosmos, and there's the religious doctrine that our life on Earth is nothing compared to an eternity in heaven or hell. But none of these provides a *real* alternative — by which I mean an alternative that we can explore

abandon civilization and return to living as part of nature. Even the Beast of Revelations resembles advanced civilization, a many-headed entity that destroys the world and forces us into submission.

Eastern Religion. There are a lot of Eastern religions and philosophies, and this argument does not apply to all of them. But the most popular ones seem to contain two key myths of civilization. One is humanism, which appears as the idea that humans are on a "higher" spiritual "level" than all other animals. And the other, underlying this, is the idea of spiritual "progress," that different states of being can be put in order from worse to better, and that we are supposed to travel in the correct direction toward some ideal state at the top. To defend these beliefs, you have to hold that progress and human superiority are universal truths, even though they have only ever appeared in a short-lived and deviant culture which is using them to drive the greatest mass-extinction in 60 million years.

Now, an Eastern-style belief system could avoid this criticism if it were willing to strip off value, to declare that humans and other beings are merely in different places, none better or worse, and if I want to go hang out as a three-toed sloth for a billion lifetimes, that is exactly as commendable as seeking "enlightenment." I'm sure the actual religions have more subtle ways to answer the criticism, but to my knowledge, none of them are willing to accept the possibility that the last several thousand years of human changes have been a spiritual mistake.

Gnosticism. Gnosticism is one of the few civilized belief systems that is not overturned by the critique of civilization, but just gets its hair blown a little, and then can hang around and have a dialogue. I'm dealing here with the simplified popular "gnosticism" found in movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*: that we are in an artificial reality, a prison for the mind and body, that we are kept here by a sinister architect and agents who seem to be people like us, that we can escape from the prison or even destroy it, and that someone on the outside is trying to help us.

The key question is: Is wild nature part of the prison? Anyone who has spent ten minutes watching swallows at sunset will not accept a belief system that declares a need for swallows to awaken. As Edward Abbey said:

Non-civilized people observed in historical times tend to be healthier than civilized people, and quite long-lived. As for prehistoric people, we can only look at their skeletons. Here's what Jared Diamond wrote in The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race:

At Dickson Mounds, located near the confluence of the Spoon and Illinois rivers, archaeologists have excavated some 800 skeletons that paint a picture of the health changes that occurred when a hunter-gatherer culture gave way to intensive maize farming around AD 1150 . . . Compared to the hunter-gatherers who preceded them, the farmers had a nearly 50 percent increase in [tooth] enamel defects indicative of malnutrition, a fourfold increase in iron-deficiency anemia (evidenced by a bone condition called porotic hyperostosis), a threefold rise in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease in general, and an increase in degenerative conditions of the spine, probably reflecting a lot of hard physical labor.

Still, on the whole, don't we live better than primitive people? Didn't they constantly struggle for existence and fight each other a lot?

It's true that people in emotionally healthy subcultures in elite nations have it better in many ways than people in the nastiest tribes. But some observed nature-based societies look like utopia compared to civilization — the political structure is egalitarian and non-coercive, fighting is rarely deadly, the people are strong and happy, and they spend only a few hours a day in the meaningful activities of survival, and the rest of their time playing and slacking off.

What about the Aztecs or the Mayans or the Incas, who had strict hierarchy and human sacrifice and military conquest to support increasing populations?

I classify them as civilizations because they had repressive centralized systems linked to "growth" economies. It's true that there's not a clear division between civilized and primitive. I suspect that some North American tribes were well on their way to complex top-down government and depletion of the land. But the point is, humans are capable of the whole range, from killing nature to supporting it, from runaway increase to balance, from repression to peaceful anarchy. Even if only *one* tribe lived at the nice end of all those scales, it would

be evidence that something like that is possible for all of us. In fact many did, and could again.

What about the really nasty tribes that are clearly primitive?

The orthodox primitivist position is that we have to live with it, that despite the flaws, forager-hunter tribes are the best humans can do. Personally I think we can do better. But even if we can't, if you consider everyone from best-off to worst-off, primitive life is still preferable to industrial civilization.

I read that murder rates are higher among primitive people.

Sure, if you only count it as murder when one person hits another person with an axe! Highly complex societies have the luxury of more powerful and subtle murders. I consider all cancer deaths to be homicides — or suicides if the victims are also willing participants in the crimes. Cancer was rare in pre-industrial times and even rarer in pre-civilized times. You get it from a combination of emotional distress and exposure to toxic environmental factors, and the people who make and enable the decisions to create those factors are the murderers. Heart disease is suicide-homicide by the corporations that profit from trans fats and other heart-disease-causing foods, and their stockholders. Lung cancer is suicide-homicide by tobacco companies that standardize the nicotine dose and add even more addictive substances to increase their profits. Every car crash death is a homicide by the various interests that set us up to have no choice but to drive around in cars all day.

If there are going to be murders, I'd rather have them out in the open and honest. If you get killed in a tribal war, you're probably suffering less at your moment of death than industrialized people suffer every day, because you can see the story that you're part of.

Aren't you romanticizing primitive people? They're not perfect, you know.

There's no such thing as "perfection." That's a fantasy of increase-based society that makes us think the world in front of us is never good enough, so that we have to keep reaching for more wealth and control. The nonexistent techno-utopia is "perfect." I'm just observing what's been documented by civilization's own anthropologists, and noticing that, while imperfect, it's preferable to "civilized" life.

and that can be reproduced on command. This is what scientists mean when they demand "proof." But this is only a tiny thread of all possible experiences, most of which are unique, not quantifiable, not reproducible, and not the same for all observers. Basically, the science of Empire deals only with fully domesticated data and not wild data, because a science that accepted wild data would feed a culture that would quickly diversify into a chaos that would make central control impossible.

The critique of civilization, when you think it through, leads us directly into the so-called "paranormal," into the expansion of our curious attention through new sciences that can accept and navigate diverse realities.

Biblical Literalism. The belief that the Bible (or any other religious document) is simply literally true, is not conservatism but extreme modernism. The deeper people shrink into the tightly controlled mind space of civilization, the less they are able to deal with complexity, ambiguity, mutability, or aliveness. They don't know how to admit they're wrong, change their minds, or do any real spiritual wrestling — they just want someone to tell them how it is, period, forever. So they choose to take whatever collection of translations of old writings was put in front of them by some authority, and accept it as true in the simplest way. Whatever religion they think they are, they are Cartesians, believing in the reducibility of all experience to machine-like mental models, and they are worshippers of Empire, insisting on a spiritual system that forces universal uniformity of perspective and enables central control.

Western Religion. The stories of Christianity (which overlap the stories of Judaism and Islam) make a lot more sense when they're interpreted in the context of the critique of civilization. (For more on this subject, check out Daniel Quinn's book *Ishmael*.) The Garden of Eden represents the original human condition, a life of ease and plenty, staying in our place and taking what God/Nature gives us. The Fall is our choice to reject this way of living, to take food by force by domesticating plants and animals and storing great surpluses, so that we're no longer dependent on God/Nature, but have made ourselves into gods. When Jesus told people to abandon material wealth, and imitate the birds and the flowers, he was telling us to

like we see in our own culture's mythology of the future, landing on our planet and trading their more advanced distracting/dominating gadgets for our submission to the Interstellar Monetary Fund which stealthily enslaves the Earth's people and accelerates its transformation into a lifeless desert while temporarily enriching human elites?

What we're really looking for in space is other *stupid* life, other life that has gone mad the same way we have, and we haven't found it because our madness is a violently unsustainable deviation from reality, and if creatures on other planets have done it, they burned out and crashed in a galactic microsecond the same way we're doing, and their sitcoms and commercials and nationalist talk radio blew by us for only 50 years when we were lounging in grass huts eating mangoes, or will blow by us in the future when we're doing so again.

The Economy. What we call the "economy" is only one particular economy, characterized by: 1) command by "corporations," artificial superhumans defined as having no compassion, only the drive to increase their own ability to dominate. 2) "growth," or the escalating transformation of the life of the Earth into dead artifacts and the tokens of ability-to-dominate, or "wealth." 3) "employment," a radically disempowering social arrangement in which humans do commanded hyper-specialized labor all day in exchange for tokens which they trade for necessities and entertainment, neither of which they know how to provide for themselves, but which are provided by other commanded laborers who they don't even know.

It's hard to imagine a more satanic system, and in its absence we would build different economies, almost any of which would be better. Also, when you understand what the tokens of wealth are based on, the whole system looks like a bunch of kids making play money with which they buy and sell back, at higher and higher prices, a bar of chocolate that they're almost done eating, and that was stolen in the first place. Instead of trying to save that system, or even trying to destroy it, we should just get the hell out.

Science. What we call "science" is only one particular science, a style of filtering experience that has been designed by and for a culture of uniformity and central control. It accepts only experiences that can be translated into numbers, that are available to everyone,

But you seem happy to me. You should be thankful you live in America.

That's like telling a serial killer he should be thankful he gets to drink the blood of his victims, instead of telling him to quit killing. People in elite nations are rewarded with cheap pleasures in exchange for consenting to a system that kills and robs people in poorer nations and nonhumans everywhere. And they're still not satisfied. They chase status and money and distract themselves with hedonism and toys to try to cover up the emptiness of their existence. The only reason my existence feels meaningful is I've begun to see through the whole sham and I'm exploring ways to do something about it. I'll feel thankful I live in America when the American Empire has broken down into thousands of autonomous nature-based communities and we can ride horses on the ruined freeways.

So you want us all to go back to the stone age?

The word "back" is a trick. It implies a magical absolute direction of change. Suppose you go to your job, and when you get ready to leave, your boss says, "So you want to go *back* to your house? Don't you know you can never go back? You can only go forward, to working for me even more, ha ha ha!" Really, all motion is forward, and forward motion can go in any direction we choose, including to places we've been before.

So you want us all to go forward to the stone age?

The term "stone age" is another trick, if it's interpreted as a temporary stage in a progression that logically had to lead to the age we're in now. There's no biological reason to suppose this. Sharks have barely changed in the last 100 million years, and we consider them successful for finding a place they fit and staying there. Humans fit with nature for one to two million years, and then less than ten thousand years ago some of us tried something different that's obviously not working. Ten thousand years out of a million is like 36 seconds out of an hour.

OK, OK. So you want us to go forward to hunting and gathering, using fire and stone tools and living in grass huts, and just stay there?

That would be a nice way to live, but I don't think it's going to happen, at least not soon. I'm not asking any person raised in civilization to switch to a forager-hunter lifestyle, and I'm not going

to do it myself. It's too hard to learn as an adult, and right now nature is too killed back for it to be easy for anyone. If civilization crashes, and humans survive, then in a few generations it might be practical for people to start living that way. But there will be plenty of other options — at least until the scrap metal is gone. In the near future, we're going to have to live in a way that both feeds us in a dead world, and rebuilds the life of that world. I think the permaculture movement is on the right track.

So you're against technology — you're a technophobe.

I love technology! A fungo*phobe* is someone who fears all mushrooms, who assumes they're all deadly poisonous and isn't interested in learning about them. A fungo*phile* is someone who is intensely interested in mushrooms, who reads about them, samples them, and learns which ones are poisonous, which ones taste good, which ones are medicinal and for what, which ones are allied to which trees or plants or animals. This is precisely my attitude toward technology. I am a technophile!

Now, what would you call someone who runs through the woods indiscriminately eating every mushroom, because they believe "mushrooms are neutral," so there are no bad ones and it's OK to use any of them as long as it's for good uses like eating and not bad uses like conking someone over the head? You would call this person dangerously stupid. But this is almost the modern attitude toward "technology." Actually it's even worse. Because of the core values of civilization, that conquest and control and forceful transformation are good, because civilization "grows" by dominating and exploiting and killing, and by numbing its members to the perspectives of their victims, it has been choosing and developing the most poisonous technologies, and ignoring or excluding tools allied to awareness, aliveness, and equal participation in power. It's as if we're in a world where the very definition of "mushroom" has been twisted to include little other than death caps and destroying angels and deadly galerinas, and we wonder why health care is so expensive.

What are some technologies you like?

One of my favorites is the beaver dam, which could be built by humans too, but it's easier to just bring in some beaver "contractors"

of edible roots, we walk on chemically-sterilized linoleum and scan it for dirty spots to clean. Instead of listening to the birds to know what other animals are around, we listen to mass-duplicated recorded music with lyrics typically about infantile fixations on other humans. Instead of watching the sky to know the coming weather, we watch mass-duplicated recorded TV shows that offer an idealized view of the tedious and meaningless dramas of our enclosed little world.

What keeps all this going is energy — specifically, energy in excess of what we would have through living in balance with other life, eating and using our muscles. Energy is the pump for the blow-up doll, or it's the physical drug that feeds the mental drugs of detachment and control, which we crave in greater and greater quantities, leading us compulsively toward genocide and ecocide.

We need less of this kind of "technology," not more. We need to get off our drug and come down before we kill everything that moves. The worst thing that could possibly happen to humans and the Earth would be unlimited, free, clean energy. We would use it the way we have always used it, but more: to cut down filthy dangerous trees and replace them with clean safe artificial trees, to flatten useless mountains and put up engineered climbing rocks and ski slopes, to tame the weather into blue skies with puffy clouds that never rain, and don't need to rain because we have rivers of Dasani™ circulated through pumps. We would turn the Earth into 200 million square miles of Disneyland, with the few remaining wild animals in NatureDomes where every flea would be computer-tagged. And when this system finally crashed, through sheer incompatibility with the cosmos, nothing would survive bigger than bacteria.

Intelligent Life in Space. When civilized people say "intelligent life," they mean civilized life, creatures on other planets that kill or control other creatures on those planets to produce "resources" and machines of domination, which eventually get so "advanced" that they can fly through space and monopolize and exploit the life of more and more planets . . . But then our scientists get puzzled: Why, with a hundred billion stars in our galaxy, many of which must have planets suitable for life, haven't we found any evidence of extraterrestrial civilizations, beaming their modulated electromagnetic communications through the galaxy, warping around in metal ships

the kind of deadly violence that strengthens the patterns of Empire, and then the pacifists use this mistake to condemn all "violence" and limit dissent to protest marches and other symbolic expressions that are feeble and pathetic if they're not backed up by action.

If we understand this, we are neither for nor against "violence" or "war." We feel good about a certain kind of fighting and we refuse to be tricked into supporting another kind.

Greed. Everyone says the Bush gang, and the elite in general, are motivated by greed. But then some people look closer and say, "Wait, why to they keep seeking money when they already have so much that more will not improve their lives?"

When you look at the accumulation of capital in its ecological and spiritual context, from the first farmer storing grain up to Halliburton, you see that money is just a dream, a symbolic place-holder for detachment and control, the drugs of civilization, which make you feel strong and happy but then you need more and more just to feel normal. Under the mask, the corporate executive's desire for profit is the same thing as the serial killer's desire for a new victim, or the suburbanite's desire for a more powerful lawn mower, or the eco-humanist's desire for clean fusion power.

Techno-Utopia. Jerry Mander, in his book *In the Absence of the Sacred*, offers a surprising metaphor for the technological "progress" of civilization. All known beings, other than civilized humans, adapt and co-evolve with an environment made up of other beings with whom they interact on equal terms. Civilized humans alone replace this living, dynamic, unpredictable environment with a controlled, self-constructed environment modeled on visions in our heads. Everywhere we replace what we have found with what we have made. Look around right now — how many things can you see that were not made by humans? It follows that our evolution is no longer with others but only with ourselves — we are *inbreeding!*

From the perspective of all other life, human civilization is a cancer, but from the perspective of humans, civilization is a blow-up doll, a dead synthetic membrane that we play with for shallow pleasure, in a mockery of real procreation, because we are too frightened and incompetent to deal with the complexity and aliveness of reality. Instead of walking on the forest floor and scanning it for the stems

and let them go to work. It creates a nice pond, raises ground water, buffers runoff and prevents droughts and floods downstream, and after many years of collecting organic material that would otherwise wash away, it becomes a wetland or meadow that increases the diversity and abundance of life. And if you say "that's not a technology," you confirm my point that the definition of "technology" has been twisted to include only poisonous ones, dead machines that enable the concentration of power in an alienated detached perspective.

Another great technology is cob building, a mixture of sand, clay, and dry grass that absorbs and radiates heat and can last hundreds of years. Also, recent innovations in wood burning, like Ianto Evans's rocket stove, are almost perfectly clean and efficient while still being allied to a bottom-up social order. Permaculturists are rediscovering techniques mastered by rain forest people, arranging fruit and nut trees, berry bushes, and perennial or self-seeding ground covers so that they work together harmoniously and produce abundant food with little maintenance while actually increasing soil fertility.

A good mechanical technology is the bicycle, which is cheap and simple enough to be compatible with autonomy, and moves more efficiently than any land animal, though it remains to be seen whether bicycles can be manufactured by a sustainable and non-coercive society. I don't see any problem with telescopes, stone buildings, sailing ships, unpaved roads, sophisticated ceramics, or hand tools fashioned from scavenged metal.

Of course, almost all "primitive" technologies are great, not for romantic reasons but for hard practical reasons: They keep us close to the Earth where we remain aware of the needs and perspectives of other life. They do not require the importation of energy or resources from distant places where we're not intimate with the life and would tolerate its destruction. And they are allied to non-coercive human societies: If the tools on which people depend are all within reach of everyone, if anyone can build a shelter, make a fire, weave a basket, dig up tubers, kill a deer, tan a hide and make clothing, then a dominating power has no leverage to make us obey.

But don't people in undeveloped countries want more development?

Some of them do. It doesn't mean they're right. If I take away your food and give you a bit of heroin, you might want more heroin.

People who have been separated from a nature-based way of living, and are shown no way out of their meaningless poverty except meaningless affluence, images of first-worlders enjoying their shiny toys, will tend to believe those toys will make them happy. They're wrong. This is proven by the fact that suicide rates are higher in "developed" countries.

And many of them don't want our toys — they want equal participation in power, and land reform, and the overthrow of the colonial government that extracts wealth from their nation to send it to the imperial centers. They understand that "development" means loans on terrible terms that enrich the local elites and force people out of self-sufficient local economies into corporate enslavement.

Truly "undeveloped" people, who have not been separated from a nature-based way of living, are never envious of civilization. They think it's silly and choose it only under extreme pressure. In fact, without coercion, people go the other way. Benjamin Franklin wrote:

When an Indian child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and makes one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return. And . . . when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived awhile among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet within a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of Life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them.

But civilized also means polite, considerate, peaceful, broad-minded, cultured, learned, and so on. Are you against all that?

That use of the word "civilized" is a trick. To destroy life, to conquer, to imprison, to torture, are typical behaviors of civilization and less common in other societies. The Arawaks brought gifts to Columbus and he hacked up their children to feed to dogs. Which culture was "civilized"? The behavior that we call "civilized" is common only at the centers of civilization, among the sheltered elite. And even our greatest thinkers can barely match the typical forager-hunter, who has knowledge and understanding of thousands of plant and

will sweep it away. And it makes its way into politics in the form of the lust for destructive war. In advanced civilization, when alienation and distress are overwhelming, the apocalyptic subplots come to the front as powerful movements that attempt murder-suicide on a national or even global scale.

The anti-civilization movement is like an apocalyptic religion that has awakened: unlike the others, it can explain and justify its emotional motivation for seeking the end of the world, it can precisely define the "world" that it wants to end, it can explain in verifiable terms why that world cannot and must not survive, and it can point to a world that it wants to preserve, a foundation for post-apocalypse living that is grounded in the documented reality of nature-based human cultures.

War / Violence. Why do young men always get excited about going off to war? They think it's going to be fun and thrillingly dangerous, and then it turns out to be intensely uncomfortable and boring, punctuated by horrific pointless killing and maiming, and they return cynical and traumatized for life, and then 20 years later, young men again get excited about going off to war. What's going on here?

Tribal warfare among nature-based people is very much like the warfare that young men idealize. It's consensual, civilians are rarely harmed, it's fun and meaningful, and deadly force is constrained by ritual, so that serious injury and death are just common enough to make it interesting. Also the economic function of this warfare is not to build an empire, but to maintain balance between tribes, either by settling territorial disputes or by raiding supplies to redistribute wealth. (For more on this, look for Stanley Diamond's book *In Search of the Primitive*)

In civilization, our biological memories of what it means to go to war, and what it means to "support the troops," are hijacked and twisted to make us feel good about wars where old women and babies are machine-gunned and cities are firebombed to enable an empire to turn the world into a desert and feed the control-lust of its elites.

Likewise, among dissidents, our natural urge to fight the system physically is channeled into bombings and assassinations, which feed

land will use it to get more money, more land, and more political power, leading as sure as water running downhill to a system where one giant multi-tentacled concentration of wealth/power commands almost all the land and all the people.

The only way to maintain liberty is to maintain equality of participation in power, which requires maintaining rough equality of wealth, and the only way to do that, without having a government using a monopoly on force to confiscate wealth, is to have economic equality built into the very foundation of the system. There are only two ways that's ever been done: to have a very close-knit community where social pressure alone is strong enough to prevent anyone from accumulating wealth, or to have a style of technology where your personal wealth is limited to useful items you can carry through the wilderness.

Anarchism. The anarchist ideal of a sustainable non-coercive society has been achieved by many nature-based peoples. Still, some anarchists embrace the critique of civilization (green anarchists or anarcho-primitivists) and some reject it (anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, and extropians). The difference is pretty much in their view of technological "progress." This is a tough nut to crack. It's easier to convert your mom to green anarchism than to convert a red anarchist. It requires a difficult reframing of our whole worldview, which I attempt below in the techno-utopia section.

The Bush Cult. The movement fronted by G.W. Bush is not conservative, though it uses a lot of gullible conservatives as foot soldiers. It is a coalition of at least two movements. One is extreme progressive humanism, an attempt to use overwhelming force to establish a global high-tech security state where corporate pseudo-capitalism can turn the whole planet into the Mall of America. This kind of insane vision should be expected in the detachment from reality that exists in the terminal stages of civilization. The other movement is apocalyptic nihilism.

Apocalyptic Nihilism. Nihilism is the urge to destroy everything because life sucks so bad. In civilization the human condition is so inadequate that nihilism makes its way into religion in the form of apocalyptic prophecies, comforting assurances that this nightmare can't go on forever, that it's all going to blow up or some merciful god

animal species, where they grow, how they interrelate, what they're good for. The native view of the spirit world behind the physical world, whether or not you think it's true, is more deep and complex than the cold doctrines and abstractions of western religion.

Every primitive human knows how to improvise a shelter and find wild edibles. Not only do civilized people lack primitive skills, we even lack civilized skills — most of us can't even program a VCR or change the oil in a car. We are the most pathetic and powerless humans who have ever lived. This is good news! As wonderful as you think your apartment and your TV shows are, that world is a padded cell compared to the rest of the universe.

If primitive people are so much better than civilized people, why do they always lose?

That's like saying if I can beat you up I must be better than you. A nation that puts its attention into warfare and conquest will always defeat a nation that puts its energy into relaxation and play. People who have lived densely for millennia will have developed epidemic diseases, and partial immunity to them, while people who have lived in isolated tribes will have no immunity and will be killed off at contact.

Sure, but if they're so susceptible to invasion, and epidemics, and conversion by missionaries, and alcoholism, and TV addiction, then doesn't it follow that if we all lived like that again, we would just slide into civilization the first time someone invented the wrong technology and started conquering people, just like last time?

That won't happen right away, because the fuels that fed civilization — topsoil, forests, easily extracted metal and oil — are mostly gone. But soil and forests will come back, so in the long term, that's a strong argument against simple primitivism. Civilization is an emotional plague, and those who have been exposed to it are more resistant to it. Either we can evolve permanent resistance, in which case we will be different from any previous natural humans, or we can't, and we're doomed to keep cycling through ages of health and destructive sickness until we go extinct.

Isn't civilization part of evolution?

Biological evolution moves toward greater complexity, diversity, and abundance of life. What determines "fitness" to survive is how

well a creature fits with the whole, how well it maintains the ecosystem on which its survival depends. Civilization moves in the opposite direction, toward uniformity and deadness, replacing all human cultures with one, replacing all habitats with monoculture farms and pavement. The civilized myth of "survival of the fittest" is about exterminating competitors and depleting the ecosystem to generate large numbers of identical things. The "progress" of civilization is anti-evolution. The only thing in the evolutionary process that it resembles is a catastrophe, something that wipes out all but the most adaptable species and forces evolution to start over.

But isn't human civilization at least a continuation of human evolution, in which we came down from the trees, invented fire and stone tools, developed larger brains, more sophisticated tools, and so on to where we are now?

No. This series of human changes switched, at some point, from co-evolution with other life to anti-evolution against it. The most common story goes like this: One or two million years ago we became "human" and made ourselves a niche, where we could have stayed forever, or continued our evolution on other paths that kept us in balance with the whole. But with the invention of grain agriculture, some humans made a terrible wrong turn and dragged the rest of the world with them.

In other stories we made the wrong turn farther back, possibly with symbolic language, or division of labor, or even with the taming of fire; and at that point, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. In any case, the next question is whether we can evolve out of this hellhole, into a species that can keep itself in balance.

Are humans inherently bad?

I'd say we're inherently dangerous. Because so much of our behavior is determined by culture, we're much more malleable than any other animal — we have the power to create very good behavior patterns or very bad ones.

Couldn't we build a good civilization, one that had a lot of modern technologies but was peaceful and environmentally sustainable?

Maybe. But our familiar "technologies" were developed in the context of conquest and central control and runaway exploitation

"Love animals, don't eat them" will find it hard to understand the morality of wild nature, where you love other species *and* eat them.

The critique of civilization explains why liberals always lose to fascists: because both exist in the context of civilization, which is fascist through and through. You can't make a round building on a square foundation. In a system built and maintained by the systematic murder and exploitation of other species, there is no stopping the systematic murder and exploitation of other humans. In a system ruled by a central authority that uses a monopoly on physical force to compel behavior, it is pathetic and half-assed to try to use this authority to force people to be nice and tolerant and take care of each other. If we're all going to get along, we have to do so from the bottom up.

Libertarianism. Libertarians understand the above argument, but they are willfully blind to systems of central control that are only slightly less obvious than government. Like conservatives, they take for granted very recent and radical techniques of domination, unaware of them the same way a fish is unaware of water.

The core libertarian value is not liberty but private "property" — just ask them if you have the liberty to set up a camp on their lawn. But the only known societies where nobody is forced to do anything they don't want to, are tribes where the concept of "property" extends only to small hand-made items. The "owning" of land is only a few hundred years old. Even in feudal times, when the lord could extort wealth from a certain territory, most of the actual land was considered wide open for anyone to cross, occupy, or use (though of course this "use" meant draining the life of the land to benefit the elite). Then with the enclosure movement, the more civilized elite declared every inch of land "owned" by someone, driving self-sufficient farmers from land their ancestors had occupied for centuries, and forcing them into the cities to labor in the dawning industrial age.

Libertarians should be smart enough to see that their idea of the political effect of land ownership is a fantasy. Both in practice and in theory, it does not lead to a utopia of small landholders freely farming and trading. Because land ownership channels wealth to those who already have wealth, it is politically destabilizing. Whoever owns

Progressive Humanism. I use "progressive" in the sense of believing in "progress," change that goes in a straight line and makes the world better and better with no theoretical limit. Because humans are the only creatures on Earth that make any pretense of changing this way, progressivism implies humanism, the attitude that humans are the subjects of this world and all other creatures are objects. Progressive humanism is the religion of civilization, so dominant that even conservatives are progressive humanists, just a little slow: in every age, they think changes were good until recently, but that these new changes are terrible.

Viewed from the larger context of all life on Earth, *all* the major changes have been terrible since the invention of grain agriculture, possibly farther back. The only way to change in a one-direction straight line is to lose your balance and fall.

Liberalism. I don't mean "liberal" in the classic sense, or in the sense of favoring change, but in the contemporary sense, where a liberal is someone who thinks people are basically good and we should all be able to live together in harmony. Why do they think this? For the same reason conservatives think there was a golden age in the past — *because it's true.* We all have a biological memory of living in harmony for more than a million years as humans and countless millions before that as other animals. But just as conservatives are blocked from this knowledge by romanticized images of the recent past, which stop them from looking farther back, liberals are blocked by *negative* images of the recent past: English factories of the 1800's, or the medieval church. (Never mind that the medieval church had a same-sex marriage ceremony, or that medieval peasants worked less than modern people, or that medieval serfdom was less financially oppressive than modern rent and mortgage.) Liberals look a short ways back, see stuff they don't like, and assume it just gets worse the farther you go.

Also, many aspects of tribal and natural life are offensive to civilized liberal values. Of tribes observed in historical times, some are peaceful, but others are violent, and there's evidence that the paleolithic was worse. Even in the nice tribes there is very little religious or ethnic diversity, and someone with a bumper sticker that says

and the numbness to make it all tolerable. We have the ones we have because they fed back into these habits, and they would continue to do so. Even if we had cars powered by fusion plants, they would still daze us with their speed and enable us to live far apart, when we need to slow to a walking pace to know nature, and live close together to know our neighbors. We need tools allied to sharing, not isolation, and energy sources that do not require central administration, and energy in small enough quantities that we have to get our hands dirty and be intimate with what we're doing.

Tom Brown once asked Stalking Wolf why the cold didn't bother him. Stalking Wolf answered, "Because it's real." The same things that make primitive life uncomfortable make it more alive. In a society that protects us from that aliveness, and that also denies us the thrill of escalating "progress," how will we enjoy life enough to keep that society going?

Civilization keeps billions of people alive. If you're against it, doesn't that mean you want all those people to die?

It's civilization that wants all those people to die, by setting them up so their lives depend on practices that must end in famine and ecological disaster. I'm just the messenger. I'm not making anyone die by believing that civilization was a mistake, just as you can't save anyone by believing that it can keep going. I'm actually trying to save lives, by breaking people out of a style of thinking that is tied to a style of living that is not sustainable, so they can learn ways of living that will get them through the crash.

You're against civilization, but what are you for? You'll never get anywhere without a positive vision of the future.

What makes you think I want to get anywhere? Only people under the spell of civilization need an exciting vision of a nonexistent future to motivate them. Cultures that live in balance feel no need for a "vision of the future" because they have a present that is acceptable. Instead, they focus on their ancestors. They would say, "You'll make terrible mistakes without being grounded in the ways of your ancestors," and they'd be right.

Our visions of the future have all turned out to be wrong. From techno-utopia to Hitler's Thousand Year Reich to the Age of Aquarius to Bush's crusade to bring "freedom" to Asia, they're a mixture of

wishful thinking and lies that serve to motivate people to march toward something that turns out to be quite different.

Visions of the future are lies, and a culture that needs to be lied to cannot stand. If people will choose a comforting fantasy over a call for responsibility, as Americans did when they chose Reagan over Carter, then those people are already doomed.

But I'm a creature of civilization. I've lost touch with all my indigenous ancestors, and I *do* have visions of the future, plenty of them, which if I am "successful" will inspire my followers to make total asses of themselves while the world goes a direction no one expected. I envision stone age, medieval, modern, and "magical" technologies all dancing together in a world of wilderness and ruins.

Could civilization just be an awkward stage in human evolution, a necessary bridge to a higher level of humanity?

It's possible that we will emerge from civilization in a new form that is better adapted to work with the whole. But there is no reason to believe the whole thing was necessary, except that it's easier to take than the idea that it was *not* necessary.

And there would be no reason to call the new form "higher," to apply a vertical metaphor to harmony, other than attachment to the myth of straight-line, open-ended, absolute-value "progress," which is purely an artifact of civilization. We create fantasy sub-worlds in which it's true: going from fifth grade to sixth grade, or raising the level of a game character, or getting promoted to vice president or full professor. But *nothing in reality moves like this.*

In reality, things move in circles — the seasons, the sun, the planets, the migrations of birds — or like a coyote they wander from one place to the next, playfully, without any number line attached. If we're like the former, we're going to keep cycling through complexity and collapse, like a forest that grows for a while and then burns. If we're like the latter, then this is just an ugly place we wandered into, and soon we'll wander out of it to a new place we like better, and after that . . .

The Critique of Civilization Changes Everything

April 15, 2005

Now everything's a little upside down.
As a matter of fact the wheels have stopped.
What's good is bad, what's bad is good.
You'll find out when you reach the top,
You're on the bottom.

— Bob Dylan, "Idiot Wind"

Conservatism. Conservatives believe in a lost "golden age" that they want to return to. But if you actually look at the ages they name, and not their romantic myths of those ages, you see that they were just as bad as this age by the conservatives' own standards: In 1950, or 1800, or even ancient Greece, they had taxes, irreverent young people, and loads of extramarital sex. That's a liberal critique of conservatism, but the critique of civilization goes farther, and explains more:

Most of the "traditions" glorified by conservatives are neither old, wise, stable, nor tested by time. They are short-lived, new, and radical. The nuclear family was invented to break down the extended family, which itself is a recent bastardization of the tribe. For that matter, so is the "nation." The modern concept of "ownership" is more aggressive than ancient and prehistoric concepts, and it mostly serves to concentrate power in banks and corporations, amoral institutions with radical effects on society. "Business" is a secular command structure with a psychopathic agenda that tramples the families, farms, and towns that conservatives idealize. Even tilling the soil, even monotheism, are relatively new "traditions," allied to an odd social experiment that is failing badly.

The real golden age that conservatives are yearning for emotionally, but not permitted to grasp intellectually, is our multi-million year heritage of living as part of nature.