

# Why I am not a Primitivist

by Jason McQuinn

The life ways of gatherer-hunter communities have become a central focus of study for many anarchists in recent years, for several good reasons. First of all, and most obviously, if we are to look at actually-existing anarchist societies, the prehistory of the species seems to have been a golden age of anarchy, community, human autonomy and freedom. Various forms of the state, enclosures of the social commons, and accumulations of dead labor (capital) have been the axiomatic organizing principles of civilized societies from the dawn of history. But, from all available evidence, they seem to have been entirely absent in the vast prehistory of the human species. The development of civilization has been the flipside of the steady erosion of both personal and communal autonomy and power within precivilized, anarchic societies and the remnant life ways still surviving from them.

Furthermore, in the last several decades within the fields of anthropology and archeology there has been an explicit and (in its implications) quite radical reevaluation of the social life of these noncivilized, gatherer-hunter and horticultural societies, both prehistoric and contemporary. This reevaluation has led, as many anarchist writers have pointed out (especially John Zerzan, David Watson [aka George Bradford, etc.] and Bob Black), to a greater understanding and appreciation for several key aspects of life in these societies: their emphasis on personal and community autonomy (entailing their refusal of non-reciprocal power to their head-men or chiefs), their relative lack of deadly warfare, their elegance of technique and tool-kit, their anti-work ethos (refusal to accumulate unnecessary surplus, refusal to be tied down to permanent settlements), and their emphasis on communal sharing, sensuality, celebration and play.

The rise of ecological critiques and the reevaluation of nature in the last decades of the twentieth century have entailed for many a search through history for examples of ecologically sustainable societies--societies which didn't despoil the wilderness, massacre the wildlife and exploit all of the natural resources in sight. Unsurprisingly, any genuine search for ecological communities and cultures predominantly turns up hunter and gatherer societies which have never (outside of situations where they were pressured by encroaching civilizations) developed any compelling needs to build surplus accumulations of food or goods, nor to ignore or despoil their animal kin or natural surroundings. Their long-term stability and the elegance of their adaptations to their natural environments make hunting and gathering societies the sustainable society and sustainable economy par excellence.

Additionally, the cumulative failures of both the revolutionary social movements of the last several centuries and the continuing march of capital and technology in reshaping the world have called into question as never before the illusory ideology of progress that underpins modern civilization (as well as most oppositional movements). A progress that has promised inevitable, incremental improvements

in our individual lives and the lives of all humanity (if only we keep the faith and continue supporting capitalist technological development) has been proven increasingly hollow. It has become harder and harder to maintain the lie that life now is qualitatively better than in all previous epochs. Even those who most want to fool themselves (those on the margins of capitalist privilege, power and wealth) must face increasing doubts about their rationality and their ethical values, not to mention their sanity, in a world of global warming, mass extinctions, epidemic oil and toxic chemical spills, global pollution, massive clearing of rain forests, endemic Third World malnutrition and recurrent famine. All amidst an increasing polarization between an international elite of the superrich and vast masses of the powerless, landless and poor. In addition, it has become increasingly questionable whether the multiple pleasures of electric heat, chlorinated water, hydrocarbon-powered transport and electronic entertainment will ever outweigh the insidious costs of industrial enslavement, programmed leisure and our seeming reduction to objects of a scientific experiment to determine at what point we will finally lose all trace of our humanity.

The development of contemporary primitivist theories (and especially anarcho-primitivism) might thus seem to be an easy, logical and inevitable step from these foundations, although this would be to overlook other alternatives equally rooted in resistance culture. At the least, primitivism, as a multifaceted and still-developing response to the epochal crises now facing humanity, deserves our serious evaluation. It is certainly one of the several possible responses which does attempt to make sense of our current predicament in order to suggest a way out. Yet, at the same time there remain many problems with primitivist positions that have been expressed thus far. As well as potentially serious problems with the very concept of primitivism itself as a mode of theory and practice. It may make sense to examine some of the sources of primitivism first in order to identify and develop a few of its most obvious difficulties and suggest some solutions.

### Primitivist strands

There are several strands of development which seem to have more or less coalesced to form the current primitivist mélange of theories and practices, at least within North America (I'm not as familiar with British primitivism). But two or three strands stand out as the most influential and important: (1) the strand growing out of Detroit's anarcho-Marxist Black & Red and the anarchists contributing to the Fifth Estate, including for awhile (2) John Zerzan, although he and the FE eventually parted ways over disagreements about the status and interpretation of agriculture, culture and domestication. Thirdly (3) some activists coming out of the Earth First! milieu, often influenced by deep ecologists, promote a "Back to the Pleistocene" perspective (the Pleistocene, being the geologic period during which the human species emerged).

## Fredy Perlman and the Fifth Estate

Although there have been hints of radical primitivism within--and even before the advent of--the modern anarchist movement, contemporary primitivism owes most to Fredy Perlman and the Detroit Black & Red collective through which his work was published, beginning in the 1960s. Most influential of all has been his visionary reconstruction of the origins and development of civilization, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan* published in 1983. In this work, Perlman suggested that civilization originated due to the relatively harsh living conditions (in one place and time) which were seen by the tribal elite to require the development of a system of public waterways. The successful building of this system of public waterways required the actions of many individuals in the manner of a social machine under the direction of the tribal elite. And the social machine that was born became the first Leviathan, the first civilization, which grew and reproduced through wars, enslavement and the creation of ever greater social machinery. The situation we now face is a world in which the progeny of that original civilization have now successfully taken over the globe and conquered nearly all human communities. But, as Perlman points out, though almost all humanity is now trapped within civilizations, within Leviathans, there is still resistance. And, in fact, the development of civilizations from their beginnings on has always faced resistance from every non-civilized, free human community. History is the story of early civilizations destroying the relatively freer communities around them, incorporating them or exterminating them, and the succeeding story of civilizations wrestling with each other, civilizations exterminating, incorporating or subjugating other civilizations, up to the present day. Yet resistance is still possible, and we can all trace our ancestral lineages to people who were once stateless, moneyless and in some profound sense more free.

Fredy Perlman's vision was taken up and elaborated upon by others involved in the Fifth Estate newspaper project, most notably, David Watson, who has written under a number of pseudonyms, including George Bradford. The Fifth Estate was itself an underground newspaper in the '60s, which evolved into a revolutionary anarchist newspaper in the mid-'70s, and then into an anarcho-primitivist project later in the '80s. Though the Fifth Estate has recently backed away from some of the more radical implications of its earlier stances, it remains one of the major strands of the contemporary primitivist milieu.

And although Watson's work is clearly based on Perlman's, he has also added his own concerns, including the further development of Lewis Mumford's critique of technology and the "megamachine," a defense of primitive spirituality and shamanism, and the call for a new, genuine social ecology (which will avoid the errors of Murray Bookchin's naturalism, rationalism, and post-scarcity, techno-urbanism). Watson's work can now be evaluated in a new collection of his most significant Fifth Estate writings of the 1980s titled *Against the Megamachine* (1998). But he's also the author of two previous books: *How Deep is Deep Ecology* (1989, written under the name of George Bradford) and *Beyond Bookchin: A*

Preface to Any Future Social Ecology (1996).

John Zerzan

John Zerzan, probably now the most well-known torch-bearer for primitivism in North America, started questioning the origins of social alienation in a series of essays also published in the Fifth Estate throughout the '80s. These essays eventually found their way into his collection *Elements of Refusal* (1988, and a second edition in 1999). They included extreme critiques of central aspects of human culture--time, language, number and art--and an influential critique of agriculture, the watershed change in human society which Zerzan calls "the basis of civilization." (1999, p.73) However, while these "origins" essays, as they are often called, were published in the Fifth Estate, they were not always welcomed. And, in fact, each issue of FE in which they appeared usually included commentaries rejecting his conclusions in no uncertain terms. Eventually, when the Fifth Estate collective tired of publishing his originary essays, and when Zerzan was finding it harder and harder to endure the FE's obvious distaste for his line of investigation, Zerzan turned to other venues for publication, including this magazine, *Anarchy*, Michael William's short-lived *Demolition Derby*, and ultimately England's *Green Anarchist* as well, among others. A second collection of his essays, *Future Primitive and Other Essays*, was co-published by *Anarchy/C.A.L. Press* in association with *Autonomea* in 1994. And, additionally, he has edited two important primitivist anthologies, *Questioning Technology* (co-edited by Alice Carnes, 1988, with a second edition published in 1991) and most recently *Against Civilization* (1999).

John Zerzan may be most notorious for the blunt, no-nonsense conclusions of his originary critiques. In these essays, and in his subsequent writings--which will be familiar to readers of *Anarchy* magazine, he ultimately rejects all symbolic culture as alienation and a fall from a pre-civilized, pre-domesticated, pre-division-of-labor, primitive state of human nature. He has also become notorious in some circles for his embrace of the Unabomber, to whom he dedicated the second edition of *Elements of Refusal*, indicating for those who might have been unsure, that he really is serious about his critiques and our need to develop a fundamentally critical, uncompromising practice.

Earth First! and Deep Ecology

The primitivist strand developing from the Earth First! direct-action "in the defense of Mother Earth" milieu is heavily entwined with the formulation of deep ecology by Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions, among others. In this strand the Earth First! direct action community (largely based in the western US, and largely anarchist) seems to have found itself in search of a philosophical foundation appropriate to its non-urban defense of wilderness and human wildness--and found some irresistible ammunition, if not a coherent theory, in deep ecology.

Earth First! as a substantially, but certainly not completely, informal organization had its own origins in the nativist eco-anarchism of Edward Abbey (whose nature writings--like *Desert Solitaire*--and novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* were hugely influential) and the nativist radical environmentalism of David Foreman and friends. In fact, the original Earth First! often maintained an explicitly anti-immigration, North-American-wilderness-for-U.S.-&-Canadian-citizens-only approach to saving whatever wilderness could still be saved from the increasing human depredation of mining, road-building, clear cutting, agricultural exploitation, grazing and tourism in the service of contemporary mass consumer society--without ever feeling compelled to develop any critical social theory. However, once Earth First! expanded out of the southwest U.S. and became the focus of a widespread direct action movement it became clear that most of the people joining the blockades, marches, banner-hangings and lock-downs were more than a little influenced by the decidedly non-nativist social movements of the 1960s and '70s (the civil rights, anti-war, anti-nuclear, feminist and anarchist movements, etc.). The contradictions between the rank-and-file and the informal leadership in control of the Earth First! journal came to a head with the resignation of Foreman and his subsequent inauguration of the *Wild Earth* journal with its focus on a conservation biology perspective more to his liking. The new Earth First! leadership (and the new journal collectives since Foreman's departure) reflect the actual diversity of the activists now involved in the entire Earth First! milieu--an eclectic mix of liberal/reformist environmentalists, eco-leftists (and even eco-syndicalists affiliated with the IWW), some greens, a variety of eco-anarchists and many deep ecologists. But regardless of this diversity, it is clear that deep ecology may well have the most widespread influence within the EF! milieu as a whole, including those who consider themselves to be primitivists. This seems to be mostly because Earth First! is primarily a direct action movement in defense of non-human Nature, and clearly not a socially-oriented movement, despite the often radical social commitments of many of the participants. Deep ecology provides the theoretical justification for the kind of Nature-first, society-later (if at all) attitude often prevalent in EF! It substitutes a specially constructed biocentric or eco-centric vision ("the perspective of a unified natural world" as Lone Wolf Circles puts it) for the supposed anthropocentric perspectives which privilege human values and goals in most other philosophies. And it offers a nature philosophy that merges with nature spirituality, which together help justify an eco-primitivist perspective for many activists who wish to see a huge reduction in human population and a scaling-down or elimination of industrial technology in order to reduce or remove the increasing destruction of the natural world by modern industrial society. Although the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (no primitivist himself) is usually credited with the creation of deep ecology, the book which originally made it's name in North America was Bill Devall and George Sessions's *Deep Ecology* (1986). Arne Naess' book, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, appeared in 1990, while George Sessions contributed *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* in 1994.

## Which Primitivism?

As is obvious from this brief overview (which necessarily leaves out discussion of many details as well as other important participants and influences), the strands of the primitivist milieu are not just diverse, but often in important ways incompatible. To identify with primitivism can mean very different things to those influenced by Fredy Perlman or David Watson, John Zerzan or Arne Naess. Fredy Perlman poetically commemorates the song and dance of primitive communities, their immersion in nature and kinship with other species. For David Watson, primitivism first of all implies a celebration of the sustainable, preindustrial (though not necessarily pre-agricultural) life ways of many peoples, which he believes are most-importantly centered on tribal cultures (especially tribal religions) and convivial tools and techniques. For John Zerzan, primitivism is first and foremost a stance demanding an end to all possible symbolic alienations and all division of labor in order that we experience the world as a reclaimed unity of experience without need for religion, art or other symbolic compensations. While for those influenced by deep ecology, primitivism means a return to a preindustrial world inhabited by a small human population able to live not only in harmony with nature, but above all with a minimal impact on all other animal and plant (and even bacterial) species.

## Primitivism as ideology

Although I appreciate and respect the insights of most primitivist currents, there are obvious problems with the formulation of any critical theory primarily focusing around a primitivist identity (or any other positively conceived identity). As Bob Black has contended:

"The communist-anarchist hunter-gatherers (for that is what, to be precise, they are), past and present, are important. Not (necessarily) for their successful habitat-specific adaptations since these are, by definition, not generalizable. But because they demonstrate that life once was, that life can be, radically different. The point is not to recreate that way of life (although there may be some occasions to do that) but to appreciate that, if a life-way so utterly contradictory to ours is feasible, which indeed has a million-year track record, then maybe other life-ways contradictory to ours are feasible" (Bob Black, "Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder," published in Green Anarchist & on the web at: [www.primitivism.com](http://www.primitivism.com)).

If it was obvious that primitivism always implied this type of open-ended, non-ideological stance, a primitivist identity would be much less problematic. Unfortunately, for most primitivists an idealized, hypostatized vision of primal societies tends to irresistibly displace the essential centrality of critical self-theory, whatever their occasional protestations to the contrary. The locus of critique quickly moves from the critical self-understanding of the social and natural world to the adoption of a preconceived ideal against which that world (and one's own life) is measured, an archetypally ideological stance. This nearly irresistible susceptibility to idealization is primitivism's greatest weakness.

This becomes especially clear when attempts are made to pin down the exact meaning of the primitive. In a vitally important sense there are no contemporary "primitive" societies and there is not even any single, identifiable, archetypal "primitive" society. Although this is acknowledged even by most primitivists, its importance is not always understood. All societies now (and historically) in existence have their own histories and are contemporary societies in a most important sense, that they exist in the same world--even if far from the centers of power and wealth--as nation-states, multinational corporations and global commodity exchange. And even ancient societies which existed before the advent of agriculture and civilization in all likelihood adapted many unimaginably diverse and innovative life ways over the course of their existence. But, beyond some basic speculations, we can simply never know what these life ways were, much less, which were the most authentically primitive. While this doesn't mean that we can't learn from the life ways of contemporary hunters and gatherers--or horticulturalists, nomadic herders, and even subsistence agricultural communities, it does mean that there is no point in picking any one form of life as an ideal to be uncritically emulated, nor of hypostatizing an archetypal primitive ideal based on speculations always about what might have been.

Neither back nor forward, but wherever we choose to go

As all critics of primitivism never tire of pointing out, we can't simply go back in time. Though this is not because (as most critics believe) that social and technical "progress" is irreversible, nor because modern civilization is unavoidable. There are many historical examples of both resistance to social and technical innovations, and devolutions to what are usually considered (by the believers in Progress) not just simpler, but inferior or backward, life ways. Most importantly, we can't go back in the sense that wherever we go as a society, we have to make our departure from where we are right now. We are all caught up in an historical social process which constrains our options. As Marxists typically put it, the present material conditions of production and social relations of production largely determine the possibilities for social change. Although anarchists are increasingly (and correctly) critical of the productivist assumptions behind this type of formulation, it remains more generally true that existing conditions of social life (in all their material and cultural dimensions) do have an inertia that makes any thoughts of a "return" to previously existing (or more likely imagined) life ways extremely problematic.

But neither do we necessarily need to go forward into the future that capital and the state are preparing for us. As we are learning from history, their progress has never been our progress--conceived as any substantial diminution of social alienation, domestication or even exploitation. Rather, we might do much better to dispense with the standard timelier of all philosophies of history in order to finally go our own way.

Only without the unnecessary, always ideological, constraints imposed by any directional interpretations of history, are we finally free to become whatever we will,

rather than what some conception of progress (or of return) tells us we need to be. This doesn't mean that we can ever just ignore what we, as a global society, are right now. But it does mean that ultimately no ideology can contain or define the social revolutionary impulse without falsifying it. The vitality of this critical impulse has an existence prior to any theorizing in each and every contradiction between our immediate desires for unitary, non-alienated lives and all of the current social relations, roles and institutions which prevent these desires from being realized. Critiques of Civilization, Progress, Technology

Much more important for us than the reevaluation of what are called primitive societies and life ways is the critical examination of the society within which we live right now and the ways which it systematically alienates our life-activities and denies our desires for a more unitary and satisfying way of life. And this must always be foremost a process of negation, an imminent critique of our lives from within rather than from without. Ideological critiques, while containing a negative component, always remain centered outside of our lives around some sort of positive ideal to which we must eventually conform. The power of their (oversimplified) social criticisms is gained at the expense of denying the necessary centrality of our own lives and our own perspectives to any genuine critique of our social alienation.

The primitivist milieu has developed and popularized critiques of civilization, progress and technology and that is its most important strength. I don't consider myself a primitivist because of what I see as the inherently ideological thrust of any theory which idealizes a particular form of life (whether or not it has ever actually existed). But this does not mean that I am any less critical of civilization, progress or technology. Rather, I see these critiques as essential to the renewal and further radicalization of any genuine attempts at general contemporary social critique.

Primitivism as an ideology is stuck in an unenviable position ultimately demanding the construction of a complex form of society (however much disputed in particulars) that obviously requires not only massive social transformations, technical changes and population dislocations, but the relatively quick abandonment of at least 10,000 years of civilized development. It is an understatement to say that this poses enormous risks for our survival as individuals, and even, conceivably, as a species (due to the primarily to potential threats of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare that could be unleashed). Yet primitivism can at best offer only indeterminate promises of highly speculative results, even under the most favorably imaginable circumstances: the eventual, worldwide demoralization and capitulation of the most powerful ruling classes, without too many significant civil wars fought by factions attempting to restore the collapsing old order in part or in total. Thus primitivism, at least in this form, is never likely to command the support of more than a relatively small milieu of marginal malcontents, even under conditions of substantial social collapse.

But the critique of civilization doesn't have to mean the ideological rejection of every historical social development over the course of the last 10 or 20,000 years.

The critique of progress doesn't mean that we need to return to a previous way of life or set about constructing some preconceived, idealized state of non-civilization. The critique of technology doesn't mean that we can't successfully work to eliminate only the most egregious forms of technological production, consumption and control first, while leaving the less intensive, less socially- and ecologically-destructive forms of technology for later transformation or elimination (while also, of course, attempting to minimize their alienating effects). What all this does mean is that it can be much more powerful to formulate a revolutionary position that won't lend itself so readily to degeneration into ideology. And that primitivism, shorn of all its ideological proclivities, is better off with another name.

What should a social revolutionary perspective be called which includes critiques of civilization, progress and technology, all integrated with critiques of alienation, ideology, morality and religion? I can't say that there is any formulation that won't also have significant potential for degeneration into ideology. But I doubt that we would do worse than "primitivism."

I will likely continue to identify most with the simple label of "anarchist," trusting in part that over time the most valid critiques now identified closely with primitivism will be increasingly incorporated into and identified closely with the anarchist milieu, both within anarchist theory and anarchist practice. Anarcho-leftists won't like this process. And neither will anarcho-liberals and others. But the critique of civilization is here to stay, along with its corollary critiques of progress and technology. The continued deepening of worldwide social crises resulting from the unceasing developments of capital, technology and state will not allow those anarchists still resistant to the deepening of critique to ignore the implications of these crises forever.

We now stand at the beginning of a new century. Many would say we're no closer to anarchy now than we were a two centuries ago in the times of Godwin, Courderoy or Proudhon. Many more might say that we are increasingly further away. Or are we? If we can formulate a more powerful critique, more resistant to the temptations of ideology; and if we can develop a more radical and intransigent, yet open-ended practice, perhaps we still have a fighting chance to influence the inevitable revolutions still to come

