Dancing with the devil: On the politics of Green Anarchist, again!

Black Flag defends class struggle anarchism against the nihilist-terrorism of Green Anarchist

Black Flag

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In issue 215 of *Black Flag* we ran a critique of the politics of Green Anarchist, "Irrationalism - Steve Booth Against the Machine", which attacked propositions by Steve Booth (in *Green Anarchist* 51) in favour of *"acts of intense violence against the system with no obvious motives, no pattern"*. Booth stated that:

> "The Oklahoma bombers had the right idea. The pity was that they did not blast any more government offices...The Tokyo sarin cult had the right idea. The pity was that in testing the gas a year prior to the attack they gave themselves away."

Our polemic argued that Booth's Irrationalism is the logical end-point for the "primitivist" project; that "the primitivists have not been able to identify any positive agent for the 'destruction of civilisation' and so their politics becomes a counsel of despair...With no rational agent for primitivist change, GA are left with...making Aum and the Oklahoma fascists vehicles for 'the absolute physical destruction of the machine.'"

In *Green Anarchist* 54-55,we get GA's "response." Two Articles, "False Flag" and "The Return of the Irrationalists", take on the task of replying to the Black Flag critique. Or rather, they don't. *Black Flag* is denounced as *"opportunistic and power hungry"* (the misrepresentations about the history and politics of the Black Flag Collective are dealt with elsewhere). GA also get excited about our question *"would Booth endorse, say, the fascist bombing of Bologna railway station"* (although their excitement is a bit misplaced, as they have a go at point scoring about how we appear to believe there were several Bologna bombings, when the article clearly employs the word "bombing", in the singular).

As to whether Booth would endorse such tactics, or whether primitivism has a concept of human agency in any positive sense, we're told that Booth, and GA, reject "all ideology", and hence the question is meaningless. Which begs two questions. If the GA project is "non-ideological" then why publish a paper, set up a contacts list, or reply to our articles at all. More importantly, if "Irrationalists" reject "all ideology" isn't it strange that Booth 's non-ideological examples of "resistance" were the Aum and the militias, not the IRA, ETA, the Angry Brigade, the Black Liberation Army, and so on? As we'll illustrate, this isn't just coincidence. The primitivist project rejects all notions of positive agency, of a human subject attempting to change the world, as "reifying" – alienative. Hence, any act of resistance which has a positive, "socialistic" goal (however poorly defined) has to be rejected, while groups which have purely negative or destructive goals are seen as "decivilising" and hence embraced. The logic of primitivism leads its proponents ultimately into the camp of those who would advocate "Long Live Death".

We are not suggesting that GA are fascists; what we do suggest is that the method of primitivism, and the notion of the "non-ideological" lead precisely to a situation where questions of means and ends are buried beneath the desire for "the destruction

of civilisation." That they can dismiss the question of whether or not they would, as we raised, *"endorse, say, the fascist bombings of Bologna railway station, or a far-right militia using poison gas on a black community in the US"* as "ideological" suggests our concern, and anger, is justified. To argue that, as Booth's article *"rejects all ideology, it necessarily rejects fascist ideology"* is bullshit. Booth says the Aum had the right idea and that *"Joe and Edna Couch Potato...can either join in somewhere or fuck off and die"*. It seems that his rejection of "fascist ideology" implies only a belief that the ideology of an organisation is irrelevant, so long as it is engaged in acts of *"intense violence against the system."* Booth (and whoever wrote "False Flag") don't reject fascism –they just deny that it matters whether an organisation is fascist or not.

Given this, we wonder if GA will conclude that the fascist bombers in London also had "the right idea."

Class an irrelevance?

We are told that *Black Flag's* contention that any effective resistance has to be grounded in an understanding of class is an *"irrelevant 80s dogma"*, a *"crude workerism"*. GA, apparently, call *"for our actions to be unmediated through the working class."* Class-struggle anarchism is a *"secular 'religion of slaves.'"*

Class, contra GA, whether fashionable in the 80s or irrelevant in the 90s, is the fundamental issue of our time – the relationship between those who own the means of production and those forced to sell their labour to the property-owning class underpins every aspect of our society. The New Labour government has taken office committed to the utilisation of the welfare state as a weapon of coercion to drive the unemployed off the dole and into the workplace, to drag down wages, in the interests of capital. New Labour's attacks on working class living standards affect the majority of people in the UK. Irrelevant, though, according to GA. Environmental crisis has as its cause the industrial/technological practices of capitalism - either in the form of production techniques used or pollutants sold to the consumer in the pursuit of profit. Still, who cares, eh?

So why is class important? Because class analysis indicates who has revolutionary potential, the potential to transform society. Thus the working class is not a potential agent of revolutionary change because its members suffer a great deal. As far as suffering goes, there are many better candidates for revolutionary agency than the working class: vagrants, perhaps, or impoverished students or prisoners or senior citizens. Many of these individuals suffer more than your average worker. But none of them is even potentially an agent of social transformation, as the working class is. Unlike the latter, these groups are not so objectively located within the capitalist mode of production. This means that they do not have the power to transform the economic system into a non-exploitative and libertarian one (*"only a productive class may be libertarian in nature, because it does not need to exploit"* in the words of Albert Meltzer). And without taking over the means of life, you cannot stop capital accumulating, nor can workers abolish work.

It is undeniably true that trade unionism and social democratic reformism have, as GA assert, *"emasculated authentically revolutionary currents."* It is therefore, as Rudolf Rocker incited, the objective of *"anarcho-syndicalism to prepare the toiling masses in the city and country for this great goal[social revolution] and to bind them together as a militant force."* The class war has, too often, been mediated through reformism. It is part of *Black Flag's* objective to explore ways and means of making the working class, for capitalism, *"the modern Satan, the great rebel"* (to use Bakunin's

phrase) again. In doing so, we do not intend to distance ourselves from questions of revolutionary violence, and our movement's embrace at times of the propaganda of the deed. However, to equate such acts as the assassination of the Empress of Austria by Lucheni, President Carnot of France by Santo Caserio, or the assassination of Alexander II by the Russian nihilists with the Aum's desire to murder a train full of Japanese commuters as GA does, is to reduce the propaganda of the deed to the pornography of the deed. As Emile Henry put it *"we are involved in a merciless war; we mete out death and we must face it"*. The war, though, is *"declared on the bourgeoisie"* - not Joe and Edna Couch Potato, Steve Booth's cynical dismissal of any ordinary person who's not part of GA's sorry little grouping.

Which helps explain why GA does not identify any agent for social change and instead relies on "irrationalist" acts. It is probable that the return to a "Hunter-Gatherer" style society would result in mass starvation in almost all countries as the social infrastructure collapses. Indeed, it is tempting to insist that the primitivists have ceded the right to be taken seriously until they come up with a consistent response to the key question asked by Brian Morris of John Zerzan in Morris's article "Anthropology and Anarchism" (*Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #45):

> "The future we are told is 'primitive'. How this is to be achieved in a world that presently sustains almost six billion people (for evidence suggests that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle is only able to support 1 or 2 people per sq. mile)... Zerzan does not tell us."

Green Anarchist's responses throw up too many issues, though, for us to embrace that luxury.

So, due to the inherent unattractiveness of GAs "Primitivist" ideas for most people (*"Joe and Edna Couch Potato,"* in other words), it could never come about by libertarian means (i.e. by the free choice of individuals who create it by their own acts). Which partly explains their rejection of an agent for change as very few people would actually voluntarily embrace such a situation. This, we suggest, leads to GA developing a form of eco-vanguardism in order, to use Rousseau's evil expression, to *"force people to be free"* (as can be seen from the articles published celebrating terrorist acts). As subjective choice is ruled out, there can only be objective pressures which force people, against their will, into "anarchy" (namely "irrationalist" acts which destroy civilisation). This explains their support for "irrationalism"– it is the only means by which a "primitivist" society could come about.

Maximalist Anarchism?

Printed alongside GA's articles attacking the *"self-appointed moralistic anarcho-vanguard"* (anyone who presumes to question the authority of GA!!) is an article by John Moore "Maximalist Anarchism, Anarchist Maximalism", a celebration by the author of *"those forms of anarchism which aim at the exponential exposure, challenging and abolition of power."* Moore is also author of "The Primitivist Primer". His "Maximalist Anarchism" is helpful, because it locates for us the theoretical bankruptcy of the primitivist project, the philosophical crisis which underpins the disordered musings of Booth and co. It has always been part of the anarchist project to oppose the dominion of man over man. That dominion, though, has always been understood as historically grounded in the development of the State as the guarantor of man's exploitation by man; the guarantor of property. Moore's conception of power, though, is a-historical, and anti-materialist: *"Power is not seen as located in any single institution such as patriarchy or the state, but as pervasive in everyday life."*

Remember the film "The Usual Suspects"? At one point in the film there's a voice over from Kevin Spacey along the lines of "The greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world he didn't exist." Moore's view of power as "pervasive in everyday life" is "The Usual Suspects" as political theory. The greatest trick that capitalism could play is convincing those oppressed under it that their oppression is natural, inevitable. Power is everywhere and all-corrupting.

What does Moore mean? If Person A robs Person B and Person C intervenes to physically prevent him, is Person C's action as oppressive as Person A's? Is the state in seeking to murder Mumia Abu-Jamal no more or less oppressive than those who would seek to organise collectively to exercise the power to stop them? Moore conflates power, and hence agency, with oppression. Not all power is oppressive. The power to resist cannot be equated with the power to oppress.

In 1793 the French revolutionary Jacques Roux petitioned that *"Liberty is but a phantom when one class of men can starve another with impunity."* Moore would add that liberty is but a phantom when one class of men has the power to resist the fate delegated to it by the whim of another. Power, for Moore, becomes as one with our subjectivity, our power to act. What we are left with is bourgeois individualism dressed up as freedom. *"Central to the emancipation of life from governance and control remains the exploration of desire and the free, joyful pursuit of individual lines of interest."*

Bakunin argued that *"man only becomes man and achieves consciousness only to the extent that he realises his humanity within society and then only through the collective endeavours of society as a whole."* Moore's *"struggle against micro-fascism"*,

the reduction of social struggle to the *"anti-politics of everyday life"*, is a retreat from the collective struggle for a free society of Bakunin to the deconstructive agenda of post-modernism. As he concedes

> "The arts, due to their capacity to bypass inhibitions and connect with or even liberate unconscious concerns and desires, thus remain far more appropriate than political discourse as a means of promoting and expressing the development of autonomy and anti-authoritarian rebellion."

This is not, then, a politics of resistance in the sense one might understand a politics of everyday life as embodying strategies of resistance to the encroachments of capital upon everyday life; resistance is substituted by play, artistic self-expression (why not shopping?). As Moore himself concedes; real issues of strategy and tactics in the battle to regain control of our lives are abandoned to "the very science fictional question of 'what if...?'"

Zerzan and Reification

Moore is not the only primitivist to have a problem with the issue of agency. John Zerzan, by far the most engaged and stimulating of the primitivist thinkers, in an article "Reification: That Thing We Do" (*Anarchy* #45) starts with an examination of the use of the term "reification" as employed by the Marxist Georg Lukacs

> "namely, a form of alienation issuing from the commodity fetishism of modern market relations. Social conditions and the plight of the individual have become mysterious and impenetrable as a function of what we now commonly refer to as consumerist capitalism. We are crushed and blinded by the reifying force of the stage of capital that began in the 20th century."

Lukac's observations are based on Marx's contention in *Grundrisse* that *"Money...directly and simultaneously becomes the real community...Money dissolve(s) the community"* His use of the term "reification" is historically specific. Zerzan argues

> "however, that it may be useful to re-cast reification so as to establish a much deeper meaning and dynamic. The merely and directly human is in fact being drained away as surely as nature itself has been tamed into an object."

It would be reasonable here to anticipate an attack upon Enlightenment views of the human subject, the Descartean notion that we can *"render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature."* Zerzan goes much further. He argues that we are *"exiled from immediacy"* by our capacity for abstract thought, that *"the reification aspect of thought is a further cognitive 'fall from grace'"*. It is the human subject acting as subject that leads to our alienation from ourselves. *"objectification is the take off point for culture, in that it makes domestication possible. It reaches its full potential with the onset of division of labour; the exchange principle itself moves on the level of objectification."*

Raymond Williams once argued that *"communication is community"*, that man as social being is defined by interaction through language. Zerzan has it that *"the reification act of language impoverishes existence by creating a universe of meaning sufficient unto itself."* As Brian Morris describes it *"All those products of the human creative imagination – farming, art, philosophy, technology, science, urban living, symbolic culture – are viewed negatively by Zerzan – in a monolithic sense."*

Zerzan is a committed activist and capable of writings of both insight and beauty. His writings against our *"ever more standardised, massified lost world"* stand as powerful indictments of modern life. Yet a contradiction stands at the centre of his thought. If the *"dreadfulness of our post-modernity"* is constituted by the *"denial of human choice and effective agency"* how can we go forward, how can we change the world, except by our own hands and how can it be possible to so change the world if by acting we *"render ourselves as objects"*?

If what Cassirer called the process of creative destruction, of "man" as subject, *"doubting and seeking, tearing down and building up"* has led us to *"these dark days"* then there is no way forward. Power pervades everywhere, again. All that is left is to live quietly in the world, the *"reverential listening"* of Martin Heidegger, or *"living-in-place"* as the deep ecologists Berg and Dasmann put it. But living-in-place seems much like knowing your place, and not much of a recipe for change, and even Arne Naess acknowledges that *"only look at"* nature is extremely peculiar behaviour. Experiencing of an environment happens by doing something in it, by living in it, meditating and acting" (Ecology, Community and Lifestyle).

In practice, Zerzan draws back from embracing the notion of "living-in-place" in the here and now, faced with the rottenness of "place" as it stands. His best writings are full of celebrations of worker resistance to work life, luddism, the 1977 New York blackout lootings and riots. For Green Anarchism though, it is not so simple. The contradictions of primitivism – Zerzan's theoretical abandonment of the revolutionary subject, Moore's bourgeois individualism – lead practical, direct action politics down a blind alley. We can't stand where we are – we can't go forward because power is everywhere and human agency is ultimately reifying. The dead end of primitivism lies precisely in the fact that there can be no positive agency for the primitivist transformation. All that's left then is what Booth and Colike to pretend is the "non-ideological".

When Zerzan talks about the un-mediated/un-ideologized he means, as Paul Simons put it in *Anarchy* #44

> "the participants in riots and insurrections throughout history; luddites, Regulators, Whiskey Rebels, Rebecca and her Sisters, Captain Swing, King Mob,the Paris Commune of 187l, Makhnovists, the New York City boogie till you puke party and power outrage of 1977, the MLK assassination riots, May 68 in France and so forth."

In this, he stands as part of the best of our movement's tradition, anarchism as the voice of the *"swinish multitude."*

Booth's idea of "non-ideological", contra Zerzan, is not non-ideological at all. Both the Aum and the Oklahoma bombers had clear ideological ends. Booth wants to pretend their ends don't count (so why not, then, the FN or the BNP?) As GA concede, (and in doing so concede their own irrelevance) *"all Steve did was write."* And it's all he's ever likely to do. There is an element of "The Irrationalists" which reeks of

middle class posturing and vicarious rebellion (the comprehensive I went to school in had a few middle class twats who liked to pretend they were in the NF to wind up "the rougher elements", until they realised that there was a price to pay for posturing as fascists!).

Nevertheless, their politics have some resonance within the direct action environmental movement and they have to be taken seriously to that extent. Booth's "Irrationalism" is the dead end of primitivism – the abandonment of any notion of positive human agency. Whether they like it or not, all that's then left is the passive surrender of "living in place" or looking to the forces of reaction to bring about the death of civilisation; the barbarism Rosa Luxemburg warned against.

A critique of his ideas & actions.

The Ted K Archive
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