In Defense of Primitivism

The unabomber may have had a point

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15 Aug 2023

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Primitivism gets a lot of flack. For as long as I've been talking about politics on the internet, Primitivism has generally been treated as the butt of jokes, as opposed to an ideology that's worth taking seriously and engaging with. For most, Primitivism is the archetypal example of an unserious political ideology for edgy teenagers. After all, who wants to live in a tent, and spend their days hunting for food and fighting off tigers? Who wants to give up air conditioning, music recordings, and all of the other wonders of modern day technology? And even if I were fine with all of that, the idea that humanity is going to rise up and return to living under the conditions of our distant ancestors as Primitivists suggest is just absurd. Why would we spend our time talking about such an obvious pipe dream, which has essentially no chance of coming to fruition?

This is more or less how I used to view Primitivism. More recently, upon looking into some of the literature surrounding Primitivism (primarily the writings of Ted Kaczynski, whose influence will loom large throughout the remainder of this article) and thinking about the topic in more detail, I have come to take the view much more seriously. This article is, in effect, an attempt to steel man Primitivism in order to stimulate further dialogue about the topic. As such, constructive criticism on where the case to be presented here might faulter is appreciated.

Technological Civilization and its Consequences

The words "The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race" are very well known. These are the first words of Ted Kaczynski's infamous manifesto wherein he defends his Primitivist ideas, in service of which he had previously carried out one of the most well known domestic terrorist campaigns in American history. Less well known than these words are the reasons which Ted subsequently provides for thinking that the proposition expressed by them is true.

The negative effects of technological society

In essence, Ted Kaczynski believes that modern society forces humans to live under conditions which are radically different from the conditions under which we evolved, and to behave in ways which conflict with the patterns of behavior that human beings developed in those earlier conditions. This sort of mismatch between the conditions which we evolved to live under on the one hand, and the conditions under which we live under today on the other hand, is the cause of a great number of social and psychological problems which afflict modern societies and the people in them.

Whether or not you accept Ted's evo-psych inspired explanation for why it is that human's are so miserable under the conditions of modernity is not of much importance (although the evolutionary observation does strengthen his case, to some degree- the fact that we evolved under primitive conditions provides some reason to believe that humans would function more healthily under primitive conditions).

The real core of Ted's argument is just the claim that humans are indeed miserable under the conditions of modernity, and that we were much less miserable when we lived in more primitive conditions- usually as small bands of hunter-gatherers, or even as very small sedentary farming communities. In service of this premise, Ted appeals to a wide variety of negative factors which now afflict humans, and which were not present in primitive conditions (most of these are taken directly from Ted's manifesto, although I have added a few which I find salient as well):

- **Loss of meaningful work**. In primitive societies, most people's labor involved real *effort* (ie, it required us to use our mental and physical powers in varied and interesting ways), and was relatively autonomous (as primitive societies were

relatively small, egalitarian and unstructured, we were not typically lorded over in the performance of our labor, strictly instructed on how exactly we were to carry it out, and so on). In addition, we were directly connected to the fruits of our labor- we hunted deer so that we and our tribe could eat it for dinner, and built huts so that we and our friends could sleep in them. By contrast, in a large, modern industrial society with specialization, complex bureaucracy, and so on, our work is relatively menial, very much non autonomous, and we are completely separated from its fruits. Since autonomous, effort involving, meaningful work is a fundamental psychological need of humans, the loss of such labor which has been incurred by technological civilization has left us feeling unfulfilled, unsatisfied, and depressed.

- **Loss of community**. Primeval societies were mostly small, tight nit groups where basically everybody knew and cared for each other- under such conditions, most people's need for community, meaningful relationships, and so on, were satisfied almost automatically. In modern society, tight nit communities like this are hard to come by, and many people today are, as a result, profoundly lonely. This is because the advent of civilization greatly expanded the scale and complexity of social cooperation, and has a tendency to do so increasingly over time. Civilization, therefore, greatly increased the number of people who we cooperate and interact and coexist with, thereby weakening the *intimacy* of our connections to those with whom we interact, cooperate, and coexist. This is not a worthy tradeoff- having superficial relationships with large numbers of people is not terribly important to human well being- having intimate connections with at least relatively few people *is*.

- **Loss of status.** In primeval societies, humans generally felt like they played an indispensable role in their communities, because, largely, they did. If I live in a society of below, say, 100 people, I have a reasonable chance of being among the most successful people I know. Moreover, it's very likely that my community would be noticeably worse off without me, or that I have some skill that nobody else in my community has. However, in our increasingly large and complex globalized society, each of us becomes, more or less, fungible. In modern society, none of us are special, none of us are really indispensable, none of us have any skills that society would be bereft of without us, etc. So, not only is modern man more alienated from what he does as mentioned earlier, but the value of what he does for society has been diminished. This instills in modern man a sense of insecurity and unimportance.

- **Pervasive inequality**. Humans feel frustrated, insecure, and unhappy when they are able to perceive large material and social inequalities between them and the people around them. This is because human beings tend to judge the acceptability their own situation with reference to that of those around them. So,

if I am doing well relative to those around me, I am satisfied. If I am not, then I am unsatisfied. Now, it is clear that the existence of complex technological societies has greatly exacerbated the degree of social and economic inequality, and thus given rise to such feelings of unsatisfaction. Because societies are now much larger, there is more room for variation along relevant dimensions between people. Because societies now have the technology required to create a material surplus above and beyond what's needed to keep everyone alive, there is room for class division, where some people appropriate larger parts of the surplus, often while doing no productive work at all. Because societies now lack tight communal bonds, there is not much of an impetus to make sure that everyone is taken care of. And so on.

- **Rapidity of social change**. In primitive societies, nature provided a stable framework, which changed only very gradually. As a result, primitive humans had a sense of stability and security in terms of the conditions under which they lived their life. By contrast, modern societies are very much shaped by technology, which changes rapidly. As a result, there is now, unlike before, rapid and unpredictable change in the social and material conditions under which people live. This instills within modern humans a deep sense of insecurity, routinely rips them from conditions and norms which they have come to value, and explains the all too frequent moral panic over new social developments.

- **Excessive crowding**. Primeval societies mostly consisted of small populations surrounded by massive amounts of open space. As technology has developed further, and given societies the capability of sustaining much larger numbers of people (as well as the incentive to do so, as more people means further growth, which is the prime directive in a complex technological society), we've begun to see much larger numbers of people crammed in much smaller spaces. To be sure, some people still have their space, but many now live in extremely densely packed cities and so on. When people feel overly crowded, this tends to make them stressed out, anxious, aggressive, etc.

- **Isolation from nature**. In primitive societies, human beings spent a good deal of time in contact with nature. In modern societies, human beings spend exceedingly little time in contact with nature. As technology has advanced, humans have gained the ability to replace their natural environments with artificial environments, and obtain what they once obtained from nature from alternative sources. This is an unfortunate development, as it is well known that contact with nature is beneficial to human well being. Indeed, in recent years, new therapies have been developed which are precisely based around encouraging people to increase their contact with nature. As it turns out, even the system itself acknowledges that periodically returning to the environment which the system

stripped us from is a useful remedy to the sickness that it subsequently instilled within us.

- **Loss of security.** In modern industrial society, our security fundamentally depends, in many ways, on a complex web of institutions and individuals who we usually don't know, and have little to no influence over. For instance, my life massively depends on whether or not safety standards at nuclear power plants are maintained, how much pesticide is allowed into my food and how much pollution into the air, how competent my doctor is, etc. By contrast, primitive man's security is mostly in his own hands- if he is threatened by a predator, or by hunger, it is in his power to fight in self defense or hunt down food. This newfound dependence of man's security on a large and amorphous conglomeration of strangers, we might reasonably think, leads to feelings of insecurity, humiliation, frustration, and anger.

- **Frustration of impulses**. As Ted Kaczynski puts it, modern man is strapped down by a complex web of rules and regulations, which he must abide by at all times. This means that many of our transitory desires and impulses are necessarily frustrated by modern society. For instance, I may be in a hurry, or in the mood to travel slowly, but either way, I must drive in accordance with whatever the speed limit is. I may desire to work in a different way from how I am told to work, but nonetheless I must work exactly how my employer tells me to. In a complex and interconnected society, the behaviors of individuals must be very tightly controlled if we are to all coexist in a stable manner.

These features of technological civilization are bad insofar as they lead to substantial amounts of psychological suffering among the humans who live in such civilizations. One might also, however, think that some of these features are *intrinsically* bad. For instance, you might find things like equality, freedom, and community intrinsically valuable, and therefore abhor what technological civilization has done to us in these respects.

You might, in addition, find it intrinsically *degrading* to humanity that we are now strapped down by a complex web of rules and regulations, that our security now depends in many ways on people and organizations that we have no control over, that we are forced to modify our behaviors to suit the needs of the system, that we're deprived of the opportunity to autonomously exert our own effort and our own powers to secure our physical needs, and so on. If you are sympathetic to such values, that provides all the more reason to oppose technological civilization.

The Supposed Benefits of Technological Civilization

I have so far mentioned a whole host of negative features of technological civilization. But, one may reasonably inquire, what about all of the positive feature? Of course, we

can make anything sound bad by only mentioning its negative aspects. What, then, are these supposed benefits of modern civilization?

Most obviously, due to modern civilization, we have *a lot* more stuff. We have air conditioning, music recordings, light bulbs, etc. Such technology enhances our lives greatly- indeed, imagine how miserable life would be if all of these things suddenly disappeared. Perhaps, then, the aforementioned costs of technological society are a price worth paying.

This argument, I believe, rests on a mistaken understanding of the relationship between material abundance and human well being. The insight that this objection misses is that our assessment of our material standard of living is *comparative* rather than *absolute.*

I might think, for instance, that I am much better off than my great grand parents were because I have access to iPhones and video games, whereas they did not. However, my great grand parents most likely weren't made worse off due to their lack of access to these technologies, because they didn't dwell on the absence of these products from their lives- indeed, they probably hadn't even considered the possibility of such technology. However, if most people in my grand parents times *did* have access self phones and video games, while they did not, then they probably *would* have felt deprived.

Karl Marx makes this same point in *Wage Labor and Capital*:

A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirement for a residence. But let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut. The little house now makes it clear that its inmate has no social position at all to maintain, or but a very insignificant one; and however high it may shoot up in the course of civilization, if the neighboring palace rises in equal or even in greater measure, the occupant of the relatively little house will always find himself more uncomfortable, more dissatisfied, more cramped within his four walls.

The point, then, is that human happiness and satisfaction does not simply increase linearly with the growth of access to material resources and technology. Rather, as humans gain more material resources and technology, we simply become accustomed to whatever is available to us, and the baseline that we have to experience material abundance relative to in order to feel satisfied simply becomes that much higher. This well known phenomenon has, in recent literature, been dubbed the "hedonic treadmill".

In short, it is no great virtue of industrial society that it gives people large amounts of creature comforts in an absolute sense, since having large amounts of creature comforts in an absolute sense is simply not all that important to the psychological welfare of humans. What matters, in other words, is not absolute poverty, but relative poverty- and while modern civilization for sure involves much less absolute poverty than primitive forms of social organization did, it also contains much more relative poverty.

Now, one may reasonably object: "okay, maybe having large amounts of creature comforts in an absolute sense isn't that important to our psychological health- but what about all of the products that directly improve our *physical* health? Vaccines,

anti biotics, etc. Surely you cannot discount the value of these things, which are only possible with modern industrial civilization?"

Certainly I do not discount the value of things like vaccines, anti biotics, and so on. But it is important to balance these benefits against the fact that technological civilization also introduced lots of novel *threats* to our physical health. It is well known that parasite load increases with the size and density of a population, and the permanence of a settlement. When a dense population settles in one place while producing a food surplus, large numbers of people mingle and share germs, filth accumulates, stored food rots, water supplies are easily contaminated, etc.

Industrial society also introduces massive amounts of chemical pollution, massive amounts of aerosol pollution, massive amounts of chronic stress, anxiety, insecurity, and depression (the psychosomatic effects of which are very real), zoonosis caused by the domestication of animals, etc.

It's also important not to overstate the benefits of modern healthcare with respect to our health. Indeed, as economist Robin Hanson shows, it seems as though the amount of health resources that one consumes *isn't even particularly strongly correlated with any health outcome.* It can be argued, then, that the benefits of modern civilization with respect to our physical health are quite unclear, whereas the drawbacks are quite clear indeed.

Some Empirical Evidence

So far, I have given some reasons for thinking that the advent of technological civilization has been very bad, all things considered, from the perspective of human psychological welfare. I have also suggested that though technological civilization has plausibly been good, all things considered, from the perspective of human physical welfare, the picture is not *nearly* as unambiguous as one might think. I will now turn to assessing how well these claims survive empirical scrutiny.

Empirical evidence regarding how psychologically well off people are in modern civilization relative to in more primitive lifestyles is somewhat hard to come by, and generally of pretty low quality (a commonplace for the social sciences). However, what evidence we *do* have seems to strongly confirm the hypothesis that modern civilization makes us less happy. For instance, it is a well known phenomenon that anthropologists who have spent large amounts of time living with hunter gatherer populations generally end up reporting that such populations possess exceptional mental health.

Moreover, the colonial history of North and South America is full of accounts of settlers who were captured or adopted by indigenous societies, and were subsequently given the choice of either staying in the indigenous societies that they now found themselves living in or returning to modern civilization. Upon examining such accounts, one finds that these settlers almost invariably choose to stay with the indigenous

societies. Perhaps most surprisingly, this trend even holds for people who wound up in their indigenous societies through *abduction.*

Indeed, when confronted by their Western, biological parents who offered them a chance to return home, children who had been abducted or adopted by primitive, indigenous people's (even those who had been abducted or adopted at fairly advanced ages) would run back to their adoptive kin for protection. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, describes what would happen when American parents, at the end at the end of a war, would visit Indian towns to reclaim their children:

To their inexpressible sorrow, they found them so completely Indianized, that many knew them no longer, and those whose more advanced ages permitted them to recollect their fathers and mothers, absolutely refused to follow them, and ran to their adopted parents for protection against the effusions of love their unhappy real parents lavished upon them

We also have many historical accounts of Indigenous people who were incorporated into modern western societies through adoption or marriage, many of whom had access to fairly good living standards- considerable wealth, education, and so on. By contrast to their aforementioned western counterparts, these Indigenous people almost invariably chose to return to their original lifestyle, either escaping at the earliest opportunity or after a long and failed attempt at readjustment to modern civilization.

In summary, the following historical pattern can be observed: when people have the opportunity to experience both modern life and primitive life, and are then given the opportunity to choose which form of society will live out the rest of their days in, they almost uniformly choose to stick with the latter. Moreover, this pattern holds irregardless of which kind of society the person was originally born and raised in.

Many of those who have found themselves in this position of choosing between modern and primitive society, after having experienced both, have offered clear reasons for their choice to stay with the latter. Many emphasize the comparatively high levels of freedom and equality that exist within primitive forms of social organization. The most commonly cited reason for keeping with a more primitive lifestyle, however, is the intensity of the social bonds that people experienced in such communities- the atmosphere of mutual care and love that they had access to when living with Native American tribes simply could not be replicated in a modern industrial society.

Ben Franklin, in a private letter to a friend, described the phenomenon that I have been discussing in the following way:

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 make one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return, and that this is not natural [to them] merely as Indians, but as men, is plain from this, that when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived a while among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in 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. One instance I remember to have heard, where the person was brought home to possess a good Estate; but finding some care necessary to keep it together, he relinquished it to a younger Brother, reserving to himself nothing but a gun and a match-Coat, with which he took his way again to the Wilderness.

Aside from the aforementioned historical anecdotes and patterns, there does exist some systematic empirical research on the question of how happy people are in more primitive lifestyles compared to in modern civilization. The following study, for instance, reports on a survey which was meant to gauge the subjective happiness of 145 people from the Hadza hunter-gatherer society. The results are then compared to a sample of 156 Polish participants who were asked the same questions. Based on the data in question, the study concludes that the Hadza report *significantly* higher happiness than their Polish counterparts.

The authors of the study also compare their results regarding the subjective happiness of the Hadza to results from previous surveys which attempted to similarly gauge the subjective happiness of people in various other modern societies, including the US, Russia, Italy, Mexico, Hong Kong, and so on. With an average score of 5.83 on a 7-point scale, *the Hadza outscored every single modern society that they were compared to in terms of subjective happiness.*

Indeed, not only does research find that those living in primitive societies are happier than those living in modern industrial societies, but also that, even within enclaves of industrial society which bear more resemblance to primitive life, such as Amish communities, people are much happier than those who live in the mainstream of modern civilization. As another example, the Orthodox Jews, with their much more traditional way of life, are the happiest group in Israel, despite living far below the Israeli poverty line.

All of this, I believe, supports my claim that the loss of community, freedom, equality, meaningful labor, and so on, all of which has accompanied the appearance of the techno-industrial system, has represented a great loss from the standpoint of human happiness, which has been not even remotely compensated for by the gains which the techno-industrial system has provided in terms of greater access to creature comforts.

Now, perhaps technological civilization has made us less *happy*, but this must be weighed against the fact that it has also plausibly made us less healthy, more vulnerable to early death, and so on. It's worth inquiring, then, as to the magnitude of the benefits of modern civilization on human physical health and mortality.

In fact, what evidence we do have on modern hunter-gatherer health suggests that people living such lifestyles fare quite well. Indeed, it seems as though modern hunter-gatherers have excellent metabolic and cardiovascular health, high activity levels, low obesity prevalence, healthy daily caloric intake, varied diets, and overall longevity that approaches that of modern industrial populations. The modal age at death for hunter

gatherer populations has been observed to be about 72 years old, which is near the value for the US population, at 85 years old.

The only area where the techno-industrial system has unambiguously been a huge improvement is in terms of infant mortality- this benefit is worth taking into consideration for sure, though I tend to weigh it less heavily than others, given that I don't morally value infants too much (I believe that, because they don't possess a sense of self, newborn infants do not have a very serious right to life).

All things considered, I am certainly not prepared to value these pretty meager benefits in terms of mortality anywhere near strongly enough such that they would outweigh all of the drawbacks of the techno-industrial system, including all of the ways in which it has made us significantly less happy and fulfilled, effaced many of my fundamental values, subjected human beings to indignities, and so on.

The Future

I have so far argued that most humans today are worse off than our primitive ancestors were. However, perhaps the miserable present is merely a temporary but necessary step towards a future that is indeed far better than both modern civilization *and* primitive life. If this were the case, then the foregoing discussion might not actually establish the conclusion that we ought to do away with the techno-industrial system and return to primitive ways of life. If the future is bright, it could be a massive mistake to prevent it from coming into existence just because the present is unpleasant.

Technophiles, riddled with their optimism bias, as most humans are, have been saying for many many years that things will soon get vastly better, and for many many years, such predictions have failed. Indeed, as technology has continued to develop over time, things have only gotten worse. The industrial revolution was supposed to eliminate poverty, make everybody happy, etc, and instead it massively exacerbated all of the problems that I mentioned earlier (and, in fact, *created* many of them).

Since then, we have seen technology being increasingly developed and deployed in ways that have devastated the environment, raised the probability of a global catastrophe, exploited addictive tendencies and debased popular culture in service of vapid consumerism, rendered the masses more disposable while furnishing the elites with new tools to regiment the masses, etc. Simply extrapolating current trends forward with respect to the effects of technology, the future of technological civilization looks very bleak indeed.

Moreover, as I have written about before, if we enter into the age of AI (which appears to be approaching rapidly) with capitalism as our economic system (as is *overwhelmingly* likely), the result will be that workers become completely disempowered, now with nothing to offer the capitalist overlords (as almost all labor will be automated), while the capitalists will become immensely *more* powerful, now in possession of the most powerful tool that humans have ever devised. The most likely

future for technological civilization, in other words, is a barbarically unequal social order based on the abject domination of the masses by a tiny minority of society.

It's hard to say how such a scenario would play out, exactly- perhaps the elites would simply end up exterminating the masses, perhaps they would end up using biological and psychological techniques to regiment the masses in ways that serve their own interests, perhaps they would use simple coercion and brute force to lord over the masses, etc. What I do know is that I don't want to see what happens when power between an elite minority on the one hand, and the masses on the other hand, becomes far more unequal than it has ever been in human history.

Of course, this all assumes that (some) humans retain control over AI in the first place. It is also possible that AI's themselves wind up in power, either because they seize power willfully, or because, over time, humans end up delegating more and more decision making power to AI's until, at some point, AI's find themselves in a position of absolute control. If this were to happen, there is no telling what AI's would do with the world and with humanity, but once again, what I do know is that I don't want to find out.

The Primitivist Solution

In summary, it indeed seems to be the case that the industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. Not only that, but it seems that if the techno-industrial system continues to develop along its current growth trajectory, things will only get worse. As a consequence of these two claims, Ted Kaczynski and others suggest that we revolt against the techno-industrial system.

It should be noted at this point, for potential legal reasons, that nothing about the discussion that follows should be interpreted as advocacy for any illegal or violent activities- any talk of taking down the system, or targeting its critical chokepoints, is meant to refer to non violent activities.

Primitivist Revolution

What Ted Kaczynski proposes is more or less the classic revolutionary ideal. Kaczynski believes, plausibly, that the techno-industrial system possesses built in dynamics which make it terminally unstable. For instance, As civilization becomes larger and more complex, as it has a tendency to do, it becomes increasingly interconnected and reliant upon intricate networks of infrastructure, supply chains, and institutions. This interconnectedness makes civilization more vulnerable, as disruptions in one area can have cascading effects throughout the system. A failure or breakdown in a critical component of civilization can lead to widespread repercussions.

Kaczynski thinks that a successful revolution against industrial society becomes possible only when the system begins to buckle under the weight of its own contradictions. Once the system is already in a period of great stress, revolutionaries can exacerbate the damage by targeting critical infrastructure and supply chains and so on, triggering cascading failures and perhaps, with some luck, causing enough chaos and upheaval so as to initiate the downfall of modern industrial civilization altogether. Ted's hope is that the collapse of technological civilization will cause humans to assume a fundamentally different growth trajectory than what we were on previously, involving a permanent return to more primitive ways of life.

The plausibility of the successful destruction of civilization is aided not only by the fact that civilization has a tendency to grow more complex, and therefore more vulnerable, over time, but also by the observable technological trend that the cost of inflicting damage on society tends to drop faster than the cost of preventing destruction. Imagine when it becomes as cheap as owning a fire arm to synthesize biological weapons

and dirty bombs and so on- this seems like the direction that humans are currently heading in. (again, I should note that I do not advocate for the usage of any weapons or other violent methods in combatting the techno-industrial system or for any other purpose).

Now, some might argue that it's unlikely that a sustained return to primitive ways of life would follow the collapse of modern civilization- wouldn't humanity simply try to restart technological civilization as soon as possible? This objection is typically underpinned by the assumption that there's an inherent drive within humans to create more technology and more material abundance, and therefore bigger and more complicated civilizations, and so on. After all, isn't it precisely that drive which landed us in this whole predicament in the first place?

Many things can be said about this objection. Firstly, this objection makes controversial and probably false assumptions regarding how historically contingent the current growth trajectory is, and whether or not there was an equally (or perhaps even *more*) plausible alternative path involving the long term persistence of small cliques who didn't pursue material development, economic growth, and so on. We tend to, by default, think of the march of history as following a fixed path towards our current situation- but what if, in fact, the march of history (and human nature itself) is much more open ended, with the current trajectory simply being the one that we happened to land on?

Modern anthropological research, as discussed in Graeber and Wengrow's seminal book *The Dawn of Everything*, seems to support the latter suggestion. Indeed, as has been discovered, there is a whole lot of examples throughout history involving social arrangements where material growth and innovation were not pursued or desired whatsoever. The idea that humans have some built in mechanism which ensures the development of technological civilization, then, seems to be simple dogma.

Not only does the long term persistence of small, low growth cliques seem like a possible alternative scenario to the development of technological civilization, but one might also suggest that the mindset shift and cultural memory associated with the catastrophic collapse of civilization would be especially helpful in increasing the likelihood of such a scenario.

Moreover, it is debatable whether or not, if industrial civilization were to collapse, it would even be *possible* to restart it, since we've already depleted the petrocarbon reserves that are easy to exploit. Certainly, at the very least, it seems as though this factor would make restarting civilization much more difficult than it was to start it in the first place.

Finally, a Primitivist can argue that even if large scale industrial society eventually does come back, the delaying of industrial civilization which would be achieved by a Primitivist revolution would be desirable in its own right- if nothing else, it would substantially reduce the amount of time that our species spends living in advanced civilizations across all of space and time, which is a very good thing, if you buy the Primitivist's evaluative claims about industrial civilization.

Two Tasks for Primitivists

From considerations presented in the foregoing discussion, Kaczynski concludes that there are two primary tasks which confront Primitivists today. The first is to heighten the degree of stress on the techno-industrial system as much as possible, so as to increase the likelihood that it will either break down automatically, or be sufficiently weakened that a revolution against the system becomes possible. Ted Kaczynski, in other words, advocates a form of accelerationism.

The second task for modern day Primitivist's is to develop and propagate an ideology that opposes technology and civilization. Such an ideology, if successfully spread to a sufficiently large number of people, could provide the basis for a revolution against technological civilization if and when the system becomes sufficiently weakened. Additionally, the presence of such an ideology helps to ensure that, if and when the system collapses, its remnants will be smashed beyond repair, such that it will become much more difficult for anyone to restart the system- a possibility which we considered in the last section. Such revolutionaries, Kaczynski says, should destroy the former factories, burn the technical books, etc.

Why Not Just Reform Technological Civilization?

Even if you agree with my claims that the advent of technological civilization has been bad for humans, and that things will get even worse if they continue along the current growth trajectory, you might nonetheless think that destroying the techno-industrial system, as I have advocated, is not the right solution. Rather than destroying technological civilization because of how it conflicts with community, equality, freedom, well being, dignity, etc., we should attempt to reform the techno-industrial system such that it is brought into accordance with these values, one might argue.

Such views, I think, are understandable but ultimately misguided for two principal reasons: the first reason is that many of the system's flaws are so deeply interwoven into the fundamental dynamics of the system that these flaws must exist if the system is to function effectively. The second reason is that, to the extent that it is even possible, addressing the faults of technological civilization by simply reshaping the system is strategically and pragmatically unviable. Any such efforts, I claim, have an exceedingly low probability of succeeding, even relative to the aforementioned Primitivist solution.

Starting with the first point, Ted Kaczynski gives several salient examples of problems which are inexorably written into the techno-industrial system, and therefore are not open to being solved through simple reformation of the system. Ted's focus was primarily on the ways in which the system restricts our autonomy and thereby frustrates many of our needs and impulses. For instance, it's hard to imagine the system being able to function without regulating and controlling human behavior to a high degree, or without people having their lives shaped by decisions that they have very

little influence over- these are simply necessary products of any attempt to effectively coordinate large numbers of people.

Similar points can be made about, for instance, the dissolution of community- in order to function effectively, in other words, the system must weaken family and community ties. After all, if people's loyalty to small-scale local communities were to be stronger than their loyalty to the system, such communities would pursue their own interests at the expense of the system. It is clear, then, that efforts at reshaping the system

However, to the extent that the problems of technological civilization are solvable without the complete abolition of the system, I claim that any effort aimed at accomplishing this is very unlikely to succeed. This is because any movement aimed at reshaping the system would have to do so through one of two methods, both of which face serious pitfalls which threaten their success.

It is clear that any movement which seeks to address a substantial amount of the system's problems would thereby have to very substantially reshape the social order. Any such movement must therefore either 1. Initiate a revolution which would not only destroy the existing social order but establish a new, radically different social order with new, radically different complex institutional arrangements, or 2. Work towards a radically new and different social order of that sort gradually and through reform.

We can therefore divide those who wish to reconcile the system's problems while preserving the system itself into two groups, corresponding to the two strategies mentioned above: revolutionaries and reformists. The claim, again, is that both groups are doomed to fail for separate reasons. I will begin by discussing the plight of the revolutionary.

In order to understand why revolution (at least, the sort that seeks to replace the existing complex institutional setup with a different complex institutional setup) is doomed to fail, it's important to recognize that the way that society is now- the institutions that exist and so on- is the product of a very long and arduous process of natural selection. Civilizations experiment with new institutions, policies, forms of governance, and so on, generally choosing to adopt what works well while discarding what doesn't. As such, there are unfathomable amounts of tacit knowledge and information which are built into our modern day institutions and social/economic/political mechanisms.

There are, in other words, reasons why things are the way that they are which just aren't obvious to us, as our existing society largely did not develop through a process of deliberate planning- it's not as though we established our current set of institutions and societal mechanisms by laying out a grand plan with detailed explanations for why things will be the way that they are, and implementing it.

It's also worth noting that the various institutions and mechanisms in any society are deeply interconnected- as such, large changes to some important aspects of society will inevitably have large amounts of cascading impacts on other aspects in society.

The point, then, is this: Given the complexity and interconnectedness of civilization, it's extremely unlikely that revolutionaries would be able to anticipate all of the second order effects of sudden and radical social transformation from the armchair. And because the institutional setup that they'd be messing with has lots of tacit information built into it which allows it to function as well as it does, and which the revolutionaries couldn't possibly take into account when restructuring the system, it's likely that such transformation will make things worse off, and leave civilization unable to function in critical ways.

The reformist would likely find all that I've said so far pretty agreeable. Of course, they would say, sudden and dramatic changes in the social system are likely to lead to unforeseeable negative consequences. Better, then, to gradually turn the dials of society in what we suspect might be a more healthy direction, observe the results, and adjust accordingly. The caution urged by the reformist avoids the issues which we previously discussed with revolutionary efforts, for sure. Unfortunately, the reformist ideal comes with its own defects.

Because any individual reform can be put in place relatively easily, and through mainstream channels, so too can any individual reform be repealed relatively easily, and through relatively mainstream channels. Because reformists pursue only minor, gradual changes, these changes require less effort to undue than the massive, sudden changes that the revolutionary advocates. While the changes sought by reformists are less prone to unforeseeable negative consequences, then, they are more prone to being reversed than that of the revolutionary. Moreover, because the changes that would be needed to reconcile the flaws of the system by and large go against the natural tendencies of the system, there *will* be powerful social forces working to undue whatever reforms get passed.

Furthermore, as Ted puts it, a revolutionary movement is capable of inspiring an "intensity of commitment" that a reformist movement cannot inspire. This is because a reformist movement can only solve particular social problems with each particular reform. By contrast, a revolutionary movement promises to solve the whole range of relevant social problems in one stroke, thus creating a whole new world. The aspirations of the revolutionary are more grand and immediate, whereas the aspirations of the reformist are more modest and long term. People are more likely to fight hard and take great risks and sacrifices in service of aspirations of the former variety as opposed to aspirations of the latter variety.

There are other dynamics that threaten the prospects of the reformist project as well. If you look toward those who are supposed to work within the system to carry out reforms (that is, elected officials), and analyze clearly the structural incentives and constraints that such actors face, it seems highly likely that the reformers, rather than effectively changing the system, will be changed *by* the system. We observe routinely the phenomenon where congress people go to Washington wanting genuine, substantial change, only to realize that if they are to hold onto power, they must make themselves beholden to establishment interests.

The claims of this section, I would argue, are largely supported by the historical record- revolutions aimed at fundamentally restructuring existing institutions, such as the Bolshevik revolution or the Chinese communist revolution, have tended to result in societies which looked nothing like what the revolutionaries had hoped for (perhaps excluding those of the revolutionaries who wound up in power), and which failed to function in critical ways.

Moreover, reformist movements which have sought to substantially change the system, such as the social democratic movements in the Nordic countries or the US leftist movement around the time of the new deal, have resulted in positive but relatively minor changes, up until the point where the political winds inevitably shifted and the system struck back, causing the movements to lose their political momentum, at which point they were forced to watch helplessly as their reforms were slowly rolled back.

The Primitivist solution, I claim, inherits the virtues of both of the strategies I have discussed above, while inheriting the vices of neither. The Primitivist proposes a revolutionary uprising, and therefore isn't vulnerable to the dynamics which threaten the reformist. However, because the Primitivist simply seeks to destroy technological civilization and hopes/predicts that this will force a reversion of humanity to something resembling more primitive forms of social organization (the plausibility of which I have already defended) as opposed to seeking to replace the existing social form with some new, complicated institutional setup, the Primitivist revolution does not carry the same risk that the resulting society won't be able to function as intended due to unforeseeable second order effects.

Moreover, the Primitivist, in order to succeed, does not need to win over as large a number of adherents as somebody who seeks to transform technological civilization in order to reconcile its flaws through either of the two strategies that I have been discussing. This is downstream of the fact that the number of people needed to cause enough damage and disruption such as to dispense with the existing social order (which is all the Primitivist requires) is much smaller than the number of people needed to not only achieve this, but also to construct a completely new, complex institutional framework for society (as the pro civ revolutionary requires), or to create a durable and successful enough parliamentary faction to massively restructure society (as the reformist requires).

In summary, while it is an attractive idea, I argue that we should not attempt to address the problems of technology and civilization by simply reshaping the system. Instead, we must dispense with the system altogether. I argue that this is the case because, firstly, some of the system's major problems are inexorable from it, and secondly, dispensing with the system is substantially *easier* and more realistic than reshaping it.

Is the Primitivist Solution Cruel?

I have argued so far that humans should dispense with the techno-industrial system via a revolutionary uprising. While I hope to have made the advantages of doing so relatively clear, there is a drawback worth mentioning which has thus far went unaddressed. As some clever readers may have realized by now, the Primitivist solution, if pursued, would leave large parts of the current human population dead. This is, to some extent, the case for any revolution, but particularly so in the case of the Primitivist revolution, which would destroy the technology and institutions that currently allow our planet to sustain such a large population.

This is, no doubt, a major cost of the Primitivist solution, which I do not take lightly. If someone were to say that, despite having no objections to all I've said thus far, they refuse to accept Primitivism solely because they can't bear this massive humanitarian cost, I would not be unsympathetic to their outlook. That said, a couple of things can be said on behalf of the Primitivist here.

Firstly, as I have already mentioned, a revolution only becomes possible if the system is already in a great deal of trouble- however, in that case, there's a good chance that the system is on the path to eventually breakdown by itself anyways. Moreover, the larger and more complicated the system gets, the more catastrophic the consequences of its breakdown will be. Therefore, it might end up being the case that by hastening the onset of the breakdown of civilization, the Primitivist revolutionaries thereby reduce the extent of the resulting disaster.

Secondly, even on the assumption that the system *wouldn't* go on to break down on its own in the absence of a revolution, the consequences that the continued development of technological civilization will have on all of the future people to be born into it are nothing short of disastrous, as I have argued.

Nick Bostrom argues that the future, if humanity survives and technology continues to develop, could hold up to 10^{58} people. If this were to come to fruition, it would mean that every person who's ever lived so far, along with every person who lives currently, make up a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of all existing people across all of space and time. On the plausible assumption that these future people's existence will generally be of negative value all things considered, the magnitude of the harm that would plausibly be prevented by the Primitivist revolution outstrips which the harm which the revolution causes by orders of magnitude.

Even if the Primitivist revolution serves only to delay the onset of the coming technological dystopia, the amount of lives that would thereby be prevented from being brought up in technological civilization (because the amount of time which the system exists for would be decreased) plausibly outweigh the amount of harm done by the revolution.

This is all to say that while the Primitivist solution carries a great humanitarian cost, the cost of not taking the Primitivist route is arguably much much greater. Primitivist's do not rejoice at the thought of billions of people suffering and dying- rather,

Primitivist's understand the dire situation that we are in and recognize that extreme and unfortunate measures will be required to get us out of it. Simply put, the Primitivist solution is ugly no doubt- but then, the predicament that we find ourselves in is itself very ugly, and ugly situations often require ugly solutions.

Ethan
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15 Aug 2023

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