

# Stone Age Daydreams

More and more people are giving up on work and modern society in order to live off-grid, and resurrecting ideas long associated with anarcho-primitivism. But, what does this impasse tell us about the state of the left today?

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In a 1971 essay on then-rising environmentalist tendencies within the New Left, conservative philosopher Ayn Rand theorized an emergent cosmology that pitted technology against nature in a struggle for the soul of man. “The demand to ‘restrict’ technology is the demand to restrict man’s mind,” she wrote in her essay “The Anti-Industrial Revolution,” brusquely dismissing “ecological crusaders and their young activist followers” as “*cringing advocates of the status quo in regard to nature.*” In Rand’s telling, conservationists of any hue may as well have been calling for wholesale abolition of industrial manufacturing.

The alarm was more than a little caricatured – broadly speaking, the socialist left has always understood industrialization as a necessary precondition for social advancement – and few of her ecologically minded contemporaries employed rhetoric as black-and-white or anti-human as Rand would suggest. Some, however, have proven willing to do so.

Anarcho-primitivism is perhaps best understood as a fringe outgrowth of green anarchism that advocates humanity’s return to a primitive, pre-agricultural, hunter-gatherer state of social organization. Proponents disagree on what would constitute an ideal degree of technological regression, but most suggest doing away with stratifications as basic as domestication and the division of labor. Some go even further, calling for the abolition of abstractions like art and language. Recent years have seen ideas around degrowth of the global economy gain traction on the left and beyond against a backdrop of mounting crises; radical primitivists crank this thinking to a revolutionary pitch, arguing that any idea of babies being in the bathwater are an illusion. “[Technology] is all the drudgery and toxicity required to produce and reproduce the stage of hyper-alienation we live in,” wrote John Zerzan, one of the movement’s better-known thinkers, in *Future Primitive and Other Essays*. “It is the texture and the form of domination at any given stage of hierarchy and commodification.”

It was in the early 1970s that primitivism first began to take shape, cross-pollinating a handful of currents then established: including radical environmentalism and deep ecology; the work of radical anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins and Richard Borshay Lee, who romanticized pre-civilisation humanity; technology critics like Jacques Ellul and Herbert Marcuse; as well a fracturing student-activist left, which instilled a nihilistic mood among some and helped set the stage for an uptick in clandestine political violence. While radical critiques of technology had long been constrained in the realm of philosophy, a minority of 20th century activists started to theorize that it might in fact be desirable to tear down the industrial system in total.

All of this may have remained a time-bound anachronism, however, but for the echoes that have begun to resurface in recent years among off-grid prepper communities and free-floating memes on social media.

The notion of undertaking a global anti-industrial revolution to reinstate pre-civilizational modes of human social organization is, understandably, generally dismissed as fantastical and fatalistic. Noam Chomsky neatly summarized the standard line of criticism in a 2016 interview. “If they happen to be right, then we have

to be in favor of mass genocide on a scale that has never even been contemplated,” he said. “Seven-billion people can’t live in a stone-age society.” It’s a fair point: even if a critical mass of the world’s population could be convinced to abandon tens of thousands of years of accumulated convenience — an unlikely proposition — the vast majority would surely perish in doing so. Primitivists themselves have suggested that Earth could support no more than a maximum of four to fifty million people hunting and gathering for sustenance. Perhaps the most ambitious deliberate de-industrialization campaign in modern history was undertaken by the Khmer Rouge in the latter 1970s, coinciding with the death of roughly a quarter of Cambodia’s population over a four-year period.

It is disingenuous, however, to suggest that primitivists support the notion of mass human die-off, at least not in a vacuum. To some, balanced co-habitancy with natural ecosystems is a realistic counterproposal that would ensure humanity’s survival, given our present circumstances and likely alternatives. In just the last two years, wildfires have devastated Australia, Europe, and the American West; droughts have plagued Central America and the Horn of Africa; floods and typhoons have swelled in Southern Asia. Climate crisis is here, bringing with it displacement, scarcity, conflict, and an accelerating torrent of natural disasters that promise to claim scores of human lives one way or another. Ayn Rand’s reverence for the sanctity of unfettered technological progress increasingly appears as a quaint, privileged, naïve position — and a mass-casualty proposition all its own.

A wide suite of proposals, targeting a breadth of sectors and industries, have been advanced to grapple the existential threat posed by climate change. These necessarily exist within a spectrum: How better to gauge their merits than to define their extremes? The prospects of a full-blown “anti-industrial revolution” are still obscure, but it is hard to imagine a more forceful response to the ravages of unfettered industrial extraction. For that reason alone, it is worth minding the body of radical primitivist thought and seriously examining what anti-industrial revolution could entail. If there has ever been a time to put everything on the table, it may well be now.

It is impossible to talk about anarcho-primitivism without discussing Ted Kaczynski. A Harvard graduate and former UC Berkley mathematics professor, Kaczynski is better known as the Unabomber, a neo-Luddite terrorist who killed three people and maimed 23 others in a two-decade bombing campaign that culminated in the 1995 publication of his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, in *The Washington Post*. The screed was not earth-shatteringly original, even at the time of publication, but it is by far the best-known articulation of a revolutionary primitivist orientation. (Kaczynski has personally eschewed the “anarchist” label.)

Against all reasonable expectations Kaczynski’s figure has resurfaced as a recurring fixture in memes on TikTok, Reddit, and Twitter, representing a vaguely stark opposition to the alienating effects of modern technology. For many, now, the opening line of *Industrial Society* rivals *The Communist Manifesto* in mainstream cultural recognition:

“The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.

While Kaczynski carved a path of political violence, the manifesto itself is less a call to arms than an analytical undertaking — albeit one marred and distorted by personal grievances. Channeling earlier technology-critical philosophers like Ivan Illich and Jacques Ellul, Kaczynski argues that humanity has incrementally subjugated itself to a vast system of control and artificial optimization that undermines human agency, opportunities for self-discovery, and more fulfilling relationships to wild nature.

Kaczynski is hardly a thinker of Marx’s caliber, but his prognosis is similarly messianic, striking a tone of authoritative inevitability rather than posing itself as one among numerous possible courses. “The industrial-technological system may survive, or it may break down,” he warns, “but the bigger the system grows the more disastrous the results of its breakdown will be, so if it is to break down it had best break down sooner rather than later.” Kaczynski goes on to advocate “a revolution against the industrial system,” but is vague on the details save that its objective “will be to overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society.”

Kaczynski is an interesting historical figure in part for his awkward timing. When he launched his bombing campaign, in 1978, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) was at its zenith; the Weather Underground (WU) was still fresh in the public imagination; and Patty Hearst was in prison for participating in an armed robbery with the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). An alphabet soup of militant vanguard groups was conducting politically motivated terrorist attacks across the West, and their accompanying communiques were standard fare in the media and beyond. Couple this with Kaczynski’s loose connections to radical environmentalist groups and publication *Earth First!*, founded in 1980, and he is instantly recognizable as a creature of his time. Because Kaczynski managed to evade FBI capture for nearly 20 years, however, he ultimately landed as an apparent anomaly in the post-Cold War 90s.

Written and published from prison, Kaczynski’s later *Anti-Tech Revolution* (2016) advances recommendations for an anti-industrial vanguard party. To this end he mainly draws upon successful 20th century communist revolutions, “not from any sympathy for communism” he writes, “but only because the communists, by and large, have been the most effective [...] revolutionaries” of modern times. In it, he advises would-be revolutionaries to adhere to strict discipline and faith, urging that they should wait to seize power amidst an organic breakdown of the global industrial system. “It is important to recognize that a successful revolutionary movement may start out as a tiny and despised group of ‘crackpots’ who are taken seriously by no one but themselves. The movement may remain insignificant and powerless for many years before it finds its opportunity and achieves success.”

In an essay on Kaczynski’s recent reemergence on social media for *The Baffler*, John Semley and Edward Millar write that “‘Returning to monke,’” a meme that posits modern humanity in its technological excess against monkeys, or “monke”, “is a reasonably

absurdist expression of adolescent ennui for those who have to grow up living through the cosmic horror of planetary-scale climate systems that are locked in fatal feedback loops with industrial processes while the endless churn of commodity production and circulation continues unabated.” Alongside phenomena like the contemporary stature of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion, the resuscitation of Ted Kaczynski’s likeness gestures at an ambient hopelessness with regards to humanity’s prospects for realigning the industrial system onto a sustainable path. Kaczynski has suggested that anti-tech revolutionaries might one day succeed in overthrowing the industrial system after subsisting for years as marginal crackpots. Why not irony-drenched shitposters to boot?

While Kaczynski lobbies for a revolutionary movement to usher humanity through a challenging but — in his view — inevitable process of total de-industrialization, he stops short of arguing that an insurrectionist movement would or could do much to hasten the collapse of the technological system. Additionally, while his writing offers a negative critique of industrialism, his vision of primitive utopia is relatively absent or abstract, as are his prescriptions for transitional measures. To better understanding the primitivist perspective on these requires a deeper dive into the literature.

Green anarchist John Zerzan is known for hammering the movement’s core premise into fanciful pipe dreams. One of the more extreme is his proposal for a voluntary, “gradual” reduction of the global population by some 98 percent over the course of several decades, arguing that people might soon be convinced to go along due to “the acceleration of environmental degradation and personal dehumanization.” Zerzan’s primary theoretical fixations, however, lie in his attempts to divine the origins of the division of labor, which he sees as ground zero for the exploitation of fellow humans and the natural environment; and critiquing the development of art, signs, and other ritual abstractions.

Zerzan’s practical proposals are hard to take seriously, but his work is interesting insofar as it aims to present a positive case for pre-verbal social formation. In *Future Primitive* (1994), for example, he argues that the Paleolithic stagnation in stone tool development may in fact evidence the relative wisdom of that era’s hominids. “It strikes me as very plausible that intelligence, informed by the success and satisfaction of a gatherer-hunter existence, is the very reason for the pronounced absence of ‘progress,’” he wrote. “Division of labor, domestication, symbolic culture — these were evidently refused until very recently.” In Zerzan’s formulation, early hominids voluntarily forewent these and other techno-cultural development out of a kind of sublime foresight.

Zerzan’s pre-historical speculation betrays a clear interpretative bias, but at the very least it can be read as productively wishful thinking if one subscribes to the belief that industrial civilization will inevitably wear itself down to collapse — a view supported by a number of the 20th century’s most dire critics of techné. “The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes,” wrote critical theorist Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), “the

more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation.”

Nonetheless, some are working to imagine a path to primitivist liberation from industrial social organization in modern times. Derrick Jensen, an American ecophilosopher who, like Kaczynski, rejects the “anarcho-” prefix of the anarcho-primitivist label, founded the group that perhaps best resembles the vanguard movement hypothesized by Kaczynski in *Anti-Tech Revolution* in 2011. Recently criticized for its transphobic associations, his Deep Green Resistance (DGR) is an amorphous organization that operates both above-board and underground actions with the stated long-term goal of dismantling industrial civilization. “Sometimes I get accused of being the violence guy, but I don’t ever think that’s really fair,” said Jensen in a late 2010 interview on *Democracy Now!* “I really consider myself the everything guy, that I want to put everything on the table and talk about, you know, all forms of resistance. I don’t want to go in prejudging.”

Intellectually, Jensen’s greatest contribution to radical primitivist thought may be his critique of so-called “bright green environmentalism,” or those environmentalist strains that pin their hopes for the future on social innovation and the development of sustainable technologies. His 2021 book *Bright Green Lies* confronts everything from recycling to wind power and green energy storage as half-measures that foremost serve to placate the public and meekly delay inevitable collapse. “There is so little time and even less hope, here in the midst of ruin, at the end of the world,” he bleakly proselytizes. “The green flesh of forests has been stripped to green sand.”

“These ideas have been increasingly relevant for decades or centuries,” said David Skrbina, a neo-Luddite author and academic who wrote the introduction for Ted Kaczynski’s 2010 collection *Technological Slavery*, in an interview. “Nothing has suddenly changed.” Aside from his writing and research, Skrbina organized the Anti-Tech Collective, which operates as a kind of international anti-tech salon. “The stresses will be mounting,” he continues: “Environmental problems, technological addiction, events like the Covid pandemic. The main hope is that a huge disaster may jar humanity into taking action to unwind the system.”

Elsewhere, deep-ecological currents have pooled around intentional communities, hubs like The Dark Mountain Project, and assemblages like the peer-to-peer Freedom Cell Network. While their immediate practical considerations vary, primitivists broadly agree that we are simultaneously at the precipice of a messianic collapse and yet locked in an interregal stasis. For now, these and other subcultural constellations seem poised to do little more than theorize and maintain a holding pattern. Time will tell whether and how their energies will erupt.

Anarcho-primitivist doom and gloom is largely founded on an intellectual trick: if you draw a long enough horizon, the collapse of industrial society as we know it is as sure a bet as one could make. Behind allegations of calculating Malthusianism and nihilistic abandon, a more banal reading sees primitivism as an effort to prepare for an imagined inevitability. Whether their day arrives in twenty years or twenty thousand,

it seems likely that hunter-gatherer preppers may see their efforts rewarded someday. The relevant question is whether Earth's ecological timeline still, in the meantime, allows collective energies to be better spent elsewhere.



No matter where you look, the clock is indeed ticking. Polar ice caps are melting at a rate of nearly 10 percent per decade; the rate of ocean acidification is the highest it has been in 300 million years. Per the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), “we are unlikely to keep global warming in this century below 2.7° Fahrenheit (1.5° Celsius) compared to pre-industrial temperatures,” which would bring violent storms, deep flooding, harsh droughts, and other severe consequences. Proposed solutions abound but, without the degree of global collectivization required to see meaningful implementation, are largely mired in economic and geopolitical morass. Anarcho-primitivism’s precepts may seem extreme, but their contemporary relevance is worth considering — even if only as a thought exercise to underscore the urgent need for more drastic, coordinated responses to pending disaster.

At the same time there are still yet causes for a more immanent hope, not to mention a wide gradient of compromise positions between business as usual and the total abolition of civilization. Degrowth has recently picked up steam as a serious policy position, and anti-industrial social movements like Extinction Rebellion, pipeline protests, and post-Standing Rock indigenous water protectors seem poised to back it up with grassroots muscle. At the same time, the post-2016 techlash has fixed a critical lens on the relatively unbridled power of under-regulated big tech companies. While radical primitivists nail their ecological warnings to their theoretical critiques of technology, disentangling these threads may enable each to be addressed in a more practical fashion. Even a successful revolution can, after all, in the end only hope to set the stage for incremental progress.

Around this time last year, Ted Kaczynski — still the de-facto face of radical primitivism — was transferred from Colorado to a federal prison medical facility known for treating inmates with significant health problems in North Carolina. Per an unconfirmed letter to a pen pal, he is rumored to be battling terminal cancer. Still, growing youth interest in post-left deep ecology cannot be discounted outright. “Since [tech crit-

ical] ideas are so widespread and popular, and the idea of revolution pretty logically flows out of radical environmentalism, it's not kooky to think that there may be some sort of ecologically minded revolution, or at least an anti-tech revolution," said radical conservationist and rewilding advocate John Jacobi, in an interview. "We're going to have to figure out a way to legitimize territories being deindustrialized and then not built back up."

If nothing else, proponents of anti-industrial revolution are refreshing for the clarity of vision with which they are willing to speak: One may not conscience their proposals, but if we cannot organize adequate alternatives, they may one day be the only ones left. The climate crises wrought by global industrialization are the most existential challenges to face humanity to date, and ought to be addressed with the urgency and seriousness that they deserve. At the very least, if sewage systems and power grids go down, it doesn't hurt to have a few extra hands that know how to harvest mushrooms and string bolas.



The Ted K Archive

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