

# A Critique of Anti-Civ Anarchism

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Anti-Civilisation Anarchists seem to base their arguments against Civilisation most generally on cities and more specifically on the division of labour, which they see cities as the result of. In Whittenberg-James' text *Anarchy Against Civilisation* he proposes that civilisation be defined as 'a way of life based around growing urbanization and the social relationships that result.' This definition is important for later points.

Whittenberg-James (WJ) points to specialisation as the root of civilisation and therefore the root of hierarchy and social ills. His argument is that 'because of the complexity, civilisation requires specialisation and hierarchy.' Now, if we critically examine this statement we realise that specialisation does not necessarily mean hierarchy. If I chop down a tree and give the wood to someone that uses it to build a house is that a hierarchy? You may claim that the transformation of something from a raw material into a refined object creates a hierarchy between them but without a) the commodification of both the raw material and finished object and b) the absence of any exchange value for the object the argument falls flat. If the wood remained just wood it could potentially become a large number of things but a house cannot be transformed into anything other than a house and without an occupant for it a house is useless whilst the raw material (wood) still has uses. How does this specialisation necessarily lead to hierarchy and how does a lack of specialisation lead to non-hierarchy? During the Middle Ages most peasants that worked the land also cut down trees, made clothing, made food, made tools and a variety of other tasks that they needed to do to live subsistence agricultural life but no one would claim that their lack of specialisation meant they were free from hierarchy when they lived under landed gentry. It has been this way for most recorded History and most likely under non-recorded History too. By this we can necessarily understand that hierarchy is apart from specialisation and vice versa, being free from one does not mean freedom from another. WJ points to determinism as an issue later on in the piece saying that 'it is erroneous to assume that everything that exists now was an inevitability.' I agree with this completely but this in fact goes against the point WJ has been making thus far, its deterministic to see the development of cities as an entity to necessarily be resultant in not only the separation of labour (a point I will cover in my next paragraph) but also necessarily to the development of hierarchies.

This leads to the more bizarre parts of WJ arguments which are completely based in fiction rather than any historical understanding. He talks about indigenous communities and that they apparently do not meet his definition of 'civilisation'. Whilst I agree that generally speaking settlers in the supposed 'New World' rarely take into consideration the indigenous populations wants and desires and would rather ignore them in their quest for Socialism this isn't the main thrust of his argument, which seems to rather be the idea that somehow indigenous peoples didn't have cities. This is just blatantly false. Indigenous populations of the Americas had numerous cities and complex and varying social property relations throughout the Americas. Perhaps the most famous of which is the city of Tenochtitlan atop which modern Mexico City stand. This city was built in the middle of a lake and had a complex irrigation system

built by the Aztecs, mislabelled as ‘floating gardens’ by the invading conquistadors they were in fact a complex agricultural system which provided food for the residents. This complex agricultural system meant that the city did not have to import its food and rather could sustain itself, essentially disproving the idea that WJ comes up with that cities necessarily must import their food. It was only matched in terms of size by cities such as Paris and Constantinople at the time. This is one of many cities indigenous peoples of the Americas created, each with their own unique social property relationships and structures. Any suggestion that they did not have civilisation (as defined by WJ as urbanisation and cities) is based on mystification of indigenous history. Another point brought up by WJ is that ‘History tells us that when civilisations fall, the result is usually a return to more decentralised ways of living.’ This is also plainly incorrect. If we look at the fall of say the Roman Empire and the collapse of the Roman Civilisation we don’t see a return to a decentralised way of living, rather a bond between the structures of the Empire and the newly liberated landed class that live in the ex-Roman controlled areas emerged so whilst the central power of the Roman Empire dissipated, the central economic and social power of the possessing class remained, dissipating nothing. This mystification of history is present in an addendum to the work wherein WJ says ‘After publishing this I discovered that the Australian Aborigines have a very sexist feeding hierarchy and therefore should not be described as “egalitarian.”’ This is the core issue with the text, lots of assertions are made and never followed up with any form of evidence and very little critical thinking.

This points to a larger issue in the anti-civ crowd. Many of them are quite willing to make their opinions known but far less willing to actually defend them when challenged or even provide an illustration of their thought process on how they reached the conclusions they reached beyond vague phrases. Having conversations about anti-civilisation politics has led me to no further understanding because their personal positions seem to run the entire gambit from primitivism to ‘scavenging the ruins of civilisation’ for resources and everything in-between. Its claimed that anti-civ is rather a critique than a political position. That’s simply untrue. By positioning themselves against civilisation as a concept as they understand it they are taking a position. To suggest that a position of ideology is non-ideological is to refuse to stand by the position you are taking. This says nothing of the concerns that I and many others have about the safety of the disabled and the chronically ill and their access to medicine and treatment in a post-civilisation world. If not outright eugenics I have seen from certain primitivists its always vague ideas about how people can be treated without an industrial backbone to society. Rarely do you seem to receive a concrete approach to these issues.

Whilst there is no doubt some useful critiques of civilisations and certainly cities and their modes of consumption, it seems unlikely that they will be found and solutions offered in the anti-civilisation movement if this text and the few others I have looked at are indicative of the quality of analysis from the wider movement. If people want to live apart from industrial society and civilisation as they understand it then that’s

their prerogative but its simply not the catch all solution that many of its proponents believe it to be, including Wittenberg-James.

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