# Primitivism: An Illusion with No Future

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Presently burning out in the US, Primitivism is a mess of bankrupt ideological illusions. As radical theory it is worthless. As the pretended path out of the globalized torture house, it offers us nothing more substantial than a mirage for our final destination. Its analysis attacks abstractions, proclaiming etiological myths about the palaeolithic origins of our present problems in agriculture or in symbolization, and an eschatology of collapsing civilization, empty supermarket shelves and failing electricity supplies; leading on to the language-less bliss of non-hierarchical oneness with each other and our eventual merger with the primal wilderness.

Primitivism is unfruitful in its practice. The Unabomber waged a 17 year bombing campaign against science and technology. The US media was blackmailed into publishing *Industrial Society And Its Future*. Three people died. Primitivists reject notions of community, and here is one point where their practice matches their theory. Lacking ethics, Primitivist initiatives have stalled. Primitivists are eager to claim ideological influence over the Black-Bloc militant anti-globalization protesters, but do the Black-Bloc activists see it the same way? Are they being hijacked? Just who is taking whom for a ride?

This pamphlet is written in seven sections; explaining the background for why this is being written and then moving on to define Primitivism. Primitivism is related to Modernism and Postmodernism. The thinking of John Zerzan, the Unabomber and John Moore is analysed. Ten Primitivist themes are discussed — Civilization, primitive affluence, Primitivist spirituality, hostility to leftism, Zero Work, technology as an enmeshed system. Primitivist denials that it is an ideology are followed by more discussion of Postmodernism, symbolization, and then Primitivist poetry and myth. Section six looks at legitimate and illegitimate criticisms of Primitivism, including Home's *Green Apocalypse*, David Watson's 'Swamp Fever' and possible Primitivist links with the 'Darker Side of Romanticism' are examined in detail. Lastly radical alternatives to Primitivism are offered.

Published not before time, this pamphlet takes a long hard look at a low double-minded dishonest ideology. It is a necessary political act of repudiation, a settling of accounts. This booklet conclusively shows how Primitivist ideology is empty, irrelevant and unable to bring any lasting benefit to the radical protest movement, nor to the wider society. Anyone pushing Primitivism is doomed to political failure. Readers of this booklet are urged to have nothing to do with it.

# 1. Why This Pamphlet is being Written

In March 2001, *Green Anarchist* split. There are several interconnected reasons for this; the alienated, despairing, unproductive character of Paul Rogers' politics; Theresa Kintz, her destructive effect on radical projects and her relationship with the state. These matters are for another time. An important part of the schism is a basic disagreement about the ideology of Primitivism; its usefulness as a revolutionary theory, and its relationship with the *Green Anarchist* magazine. It is one thing for a magazine to subordinate itself to an ideology, where all the people involved believe in and support it. It is another thing for an ideology to be imposed, as a party line, sacrosanct and beyond doubt or question. One example of how the imposition manifested itself was in the negative slogan 'For the Destruction of Civilization'. Back at the Gandalf Trial, in September 1997, Saxon Wood, Noel Molland and myself asked Paul to change this, but he would not.

## The Primitivist Alignment

*GA* came to be joined with Primitivism at around the time of the October 1994 'Anarchy in the UK' festival, when Paul Rogers made links with John Moore and Leigh Starcross, of the Primitivist Network.[1] In his polemic with Saxon and GA(USA) Paul claims that *GA* always *was* Primitivist.[2] At the outset of this period, uncertain as to what Primitivism was, the only reasonable course of action open, as I understood it, was to wait, and see how things developed.

## Unabomber Manifesto

Shortly after this, several other factors came into play here, which obscured things. One factor was the Unabomber case.[3] Almost at once, everybody seemed to be criti-

[1] The first full-blown 'Primitivist' issue of *GA* was issue 38, Summer 1995, though Primitivist material was referenced prior to this, eg *GA* issue 29 editorial. (Summer 1991)

[2] For Paul's polemic against *GA*(USA) and Saxon's *Green Anarchy*, see his 'The Wilting of Anarchy' and 'Caveat Emptor' leaflets.

[3] (the Unabomber communique was reported *New York Times* 26th April 1995, the Manifesto was published in the *Washington Post*, September 19th 1995, Ted Kaczynski was arrested 4th April 1996.

cising the Unabomber, yet here was somebody who had carried out a series of attacks, and had forced the US papers to print the Manifesto. Too soon to make sense of it, the pacifist rush to condemn response appeared as a knee-jerk reaction. For our part, the best action appeared to be to publish the manifesto and any further information we could find.

## Under Pressure

A second factor which obscured matters and issues regarding the relationship between Primitivism and GA were the hostile, misrepresentational leaflets published by Stewart Home and the so-called 'Neoists'. Thirdly, came 'Operation Washington', the Hampshire police raids 1995–1996, the Gandalf Trial 1997, and the period after this. The cumulative effect of all three factors was that *GA* was put under severe external pressure. For me, the task of analysing Primitivism assumed a lower priority. Basic solidarity when under attack prevented closer analysis. A natural tendency when attacked is to circle the waggons and defend your patch.

## Spiral of Alienation And Decline

There are problems with too close a linking of a magazine to an ideology. A narrowing down of the agenda and approach reduces the appeal of the magazine, and prevents it reflecting or presenting what is really going on in the wider movement. Under such a dispensation, the fate of *GA* was shackled to Primitivism; it was locked into a self-reinforcing spiral of isolation and decline.[4] Under such a politics of alienation, we end up addressing a smaller and smaller circle of 'true believers'. From 1994 to summer 2000, Primitivism had its chance with *GA*, and this was my experience of its effect.

## Move Forwards, or Die?

How can this be challenged? Could Primitivism be reformed from inside, or must it rather be studied and rejected? Every political group is ripped by these kind of tidal forces. Initially, I felt that Primtivism could be interesting. I wanted to know more about it. Though I did not regard myself as a Primitivist, out of sympathy and respect for the people, I wanted Primitivism to be given a fair hearing. The 'What is Primitivism?' phase moved on to the next period. The raids, and then came the Stewart Home 'Green Apocalypse' phase, where *GA* and Primitivism came under attack and

[4] Not all of this was a result of Primitivism, much of it was also a result of Rogers' whole style of alienation politics, but as declared in the second sentence here, these matters are interconnected.

was misrepresented.[5] Would Primitivism develop into something better, something revolutionary, moving forwards, challenging the system? We all waited, and waited, and waited...

## Sour grapes?

In no way should Primitivists be suppressed or censored; this enables them to continue to regard themselves as a cruelly oppressed minority. Rather, they should be invited to give a full and clear account of their own ideas. These can then be discussed, analysed, and understood for what they are, in the full light of day. After much research into Primitivism, I believe that the time is right to publish my account; giving the reasons why the mirage fails, and why Primitivism ought to be consigned to the wilderness. One objection that some may make is that this account is just sour grapes, that it is really an egotistical dispute over who has proprietorship over the *Green Anarchist* magazine brand. I believe this to be a misreading of the situation. To be candid, it is true that I feel some resentment towards Kintz and Rogers. The dispute over Primitivism is one part of it, and the whole is too much to deal with in one place. The best refutation of the 'sour grapes' objection is the rest of this pamphlet, and the character of whatever *Green Anarchist* magazine will become in the future. There has been no rush into print, and here the intention is to discuss the political ideas. In September 2001, many people pointed out that George W Bush and Tony Blair's 'War Against Terrorism' was an attempt to attack an abstraction. So many guns, so many planes, so many bombs, so many lives pointlessly poured into a bottomless hole. A similar objection applies to Primitivism. Is the slogan 'For the Destruction of Civilization' of any use, from a revolutionary point of view?

[5] This period began some time in 1994–1995, but the ground has already been gone over ad nauseam, see *Anarchist Lancaster Bomber*, issue 11, July 1995, 'Neobore' issue.

# 2. What is Primitivism?

> *Why should we plant, when there are so many mongomongo nuts in the world?*
>
> Richard Borshay Lee, Irven de Vore (ed) *Man The Hunter*, Aldine, Chicago, 1968, p 33.

Primitivism is not a single, unitary entity, but a group of competing or complementary ideologies which express hostility towards, or are critical of civilization, technology, science and industry. Within this loose grouping of beliefs, Anarcho-Primitivism, the central focus of this pamphlet, is an individualistic, Postmodern form of anarchist political theory. In answer to the question 'What is wrong with society?' Primitivists focus on technology. Technology, following Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul, is understood as an interconnected, unified whole. "Technology cannot be otherwise than totalitarian." — Ellul, *Technological Society*, p 125. We cannot separate the bad parts from the good, and consequently, it *all* has to go. No single part of it can be left, for otherwise, this slavery would soon reassert itself. The Luddites are looked up to as having a correct appreciation of the implications of technology. A recurring theme is the 'primitive affluence' material drawn from the work of the radical anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Richard Borshay Lee, about the San and !Kung bushmen. Here, Primitivists claim that human beings lived without authorities, in a non-violent, vegetarian, pastoral life-way, in a non-hierarchical relationship with each other and the environment, through thousands of years. Then, at some point in the Upper Palaeolithic era, the catastrophe of agriculture, or of symbolization and language, art and hierarchies took hold. The egalitarian Eden was destroyed.

## Progress

> *Our sense of movement, of incompleteness, contributes to the idea of progress. Hence the idea of progress is generic to civilization.*
>
> Stanley Diamond, 'In Search of the Primitive', *GA*42, p 9.

> *Superficial faith in specialization and technical progress is increasingly seen as ludicrous.*
>
> John Zerzan in 'Technology'

Primitivists believe that we got where we are today because of progress. Progress is understood negatively: "The beginning is the strongest and mightiest. What comes afterwards is a flattening, a spreading out." — Heidegger, *The Limitation of Being,* p 155. There is an inevitability about progress, it draws everyone into it and squashes them down, negating their existence, while technology itself becomes ever more alienating and powerful against them. Perlman, for example, calls civilization 'Leviathan' and history is understood as a series of intolerable defeats, punctuated with brilliant flashes of resistance.

> *The more colossal technology has become, the smaller the individuals imprisoned within it, and the more suffocated and crushed by the artificial world built by their forced labour.*
>
> George Bradford, *How Deep Is Deep Ecology*? 1989, pp 28–29

## Doublemindedness

There are two problems with their use of anthropology. The first is that of the ideological presuppositions of the anthropologists themselves; and the second is the ideological assumptions of writers like Zerzan and Black, when they make political use of this in the present. Thus, the anthropology is brought to us through *two* layers of distortion. And yet, from this doubly shaky leverage point, the Primitivists demand we seek an unmediated experience of the primal world. The problem here is intractable. The fundamental doubleminded incoherence of Primitivism is found in their attitude towards the primitive lifeways described in the radical archaeology.

> *but there is also an emerging synthesis of post-modern anarchy and the primitive (in the sense of original) Earth based ecstatic vision.*
>
> 'Renew This Earthly Paradise', *Fifth Estate* 1986.

> *The aim is not to replicate or return to the primitive, merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy.*
>
> John Moore, *Primitivist Primer*

On the one hand, much print has been expended defending the veracity of the anthropology under the primitive affluence thesis; while on the other hand, an equal, if not greater, quantity of writing has been wasted fighting off accusations that Primitivists make a call to go 'Back to the Stone Age'.

> *Now we can see that life before domestication / agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health.*
>
> John Zerzan, *Future Primitive* p 16

*Let us anticipate the critics who would accuse us of wanting to go 'back to the caves' or of mere posturing on our part — ie enjoying the comforts of civilization all the while being its hardest critics. We are not posing the Stone Age as a model for our utopia, nor are we suggesting a return to gathering and hunting as a means for our livelihood.*

*Fifth Estate* 1979

*If Alter is correct, for a society to regress to a simpler technology is inevitably suicidal. Anthropologists know better. For Alter, its an article of faith that agriculture is technologically superior to foraging.*

Bob Black "Technophilia — An Infantile Disorder", *GA* 42, p 14

The call is made on the basis of an appeal to facts — 'Anthropologists know better ...' but to be interpreted in a spiritual sense, or as an existential template. Recently in *Anarchy A Journal of Desire Armed*, issue 52, Autumn 2001 (=AJODA) some Primitivists have downgraded the call to a return to the pre-industrial revolution stage. In this 'now you see it now you don't' Primitivism, of what relevance is the primitive affluence thesis in Zerzan and Black et al?

# Marginalised Malcontents

*The experience denoted by bewilderness remains crucial for all proponents of anarchy, who recognize that syncopating the spiral dance could facilitate total revolution.*

John Moore, 'Bewilderness' in *Anarchy and Ecstasy*

Like a spent fire, the Primitivist movement is collapsing under its contradictions, and burning out, helped on by its lack of meaning, the decline accelerated by their intellectual dishonesty, corruption and bankruptcy. Belief in Primitivism arises out of contemporary urban alienation, but these alienated individuals are the *last* people capable of building a dynamic resistance movement able to oppose oppression, and globalization. They are too busy squabbling among themselves. An examination of the letters pages in *AJODA* 52 will demonstrate the true character of the Primitivist 'movement'. As Jason McQuinn says in his 'Why I am Not A Primitivist' article: "Thus Primitivism, at least in this form, is never likely to command the support of more than a relatively small milieu of marginalised malcontents." Exactly. Yet these 'marginalised malcontents' are the only positive agency for social change Primitivists can identify, although to be fair this belief is dialectically matched by the metaphysical belief in the impending collapse of civilization, that the emptying of supermarket shelves and an end to electricity supplies will come soon. Civilization, rather than Primitivism, will collapse under its own contradictions.

## Picking the Scabs

> *But for contemporary proponents of anarchy, the crucial issue remains the light thrown on the most ancient and deeply-seated control structures in the present psychosocial environment.*
>
> John Moore *Lovebite*, 1990, p 12

Alienation begins with a generalised discontent with urban society, mass man, the shallow, vacuuous culture of fast food, soap operas, TV quizes, synthetic pop groups. There is discontent over crime, drug-taking, boredom, Post-modernism. Then there are the ecological horrors like global-warming, Chernobyl, organo-phosphates, endocrine modifying chemicals in water, asthma plagues, obesity. Nothing said in this pamphlet is intended to deny or diminish the reality of these problems. The individual's response to these could be to internalise all this negativity, turn inwards on oneself, and go mad. This reaction does nothing to address the problem. Then again, it is possible to join any one of the myriad protest groups, and engage in political activity to challenge all this. This is a positive response. Somewhere between the two is an internalised, schizophrenic and irrelevant pseudo-politics. It is within that area that we must place Primitivism. Primitivism is a politics of histrionics, of grand but entirely artificial gestures — 'let us sweep it all away!' or 'For the Destruction of Civilization!' and the waging of its war of words against language and abstractions. Primitivism is a politics of artificial gestures, of pointlessness, postures, futility and the picking over of old scabs again and again and again. It is not forwards looking.

## Transcendence

> *Locating origins is a way of identifying what can safely be salvaged from the wreck of civilization, and what is essential to eradicate if power relations are not to recommence after civilization's collapse...*
>
> John Moore *Primitivst Primer* (1996)

Primitivism will never heal. It is a type of archaeology, an attempt at digging down into the dim and distant past. What is the Primitivist attitude to the past? The problems of the present are insurmountable — what is needed is transcendence, something with the capacity to leap right out of the framework. If origins are all so important, because they supposedly tell us something fundamental about our own past, what we need is archaeology. How do Primitivists relate this to the future though? What do they really want? — These are straight questions, but it is a pig of a job to try to get any answer.

Borrowing from Heidegger they use the theme of a 'homecoming':

*The metaphor of finding a home or being at home recurs over and over as a structuring pattern within Western primitivism.*

John Moore 'Comin' Home' in *GA*38, p7.

History is understood as cyclic, following Nietzsche. Similarly, this quest for the primitive core of 'our' being is likewise problematic, unless one accepts reincarnation, a doctrine of Apostolic Succession, or some sort of genetic path of transmission.

## Now You See It, Now You Don't

*There's no blueprint, no prescriptive pattern...*

John Moore, *Primitivist Primer*

*... radically co-operative and communitarian, ecological and feminist, spontaneous and wild.*

*AJODA* quoted in *Primitivist Primer*

We need to consider the Primitivist believer, sandwiched between the past and the future, living in the intolerable present, looking backwards to the palaeolithic. There is a split attitude here. Now you see it — now you don't. Do they seek the primitive affluence life way, or don't they? The Primitivist vacillates between wanting this, and denying it, knowing deep inside that the wish is untenable. There is no clear answer to the question What do Primitivists want?

## Be Like Ted

*But as our plight deepens, we glimpse how much more must be erased for our redemption.*

John Zerzan 'Running on Emptiness'

In so far as there is one, central to the Primitivist *praxis*, is the sad case of the Unabomber, who between 1978–1995 mailed 16 bombs to computer scientists. In April 1995, he blackmailed the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* into publishing 'Industrial Society and Its Future':

(Section 181) *The two main tasks for the present are to promote social stress and instability in industrial society, and to develop and propagate an ideology that opposes technology and the industrial system. When the system becomes sufficiently stressed and unstable, a revolution against technology may be possible.*

(s 200) *Until the industrial system has been thoroughly wrecked, the destruction of that system must be the revolutionaries'* ***only*** *goal.*

*The concept of justice should not be overlooked in considering the Unabomber phenomenon. In fact, except for his targets, when have the many little Eichmanns who are preparing the brave new world ever been called to account?*

Zerzan 'Whose Unabomber?' *GA* 40/41 p 22.

Implicit within Primitivism is the notion of sacrifice. 'We must give up our mobile phones...' but this extends from individual benefits such as washing machines and the internet, out to cover technology as a *whole*. Unfortunately the rest of society is not ready to give up its cars and televisions. Therefore, the Primitivist has three choices: (1) To try to coerce them using eg bombs, rioting, revolution, computer viruses, or other violent means. (2) To try to persuade them using reason and an appeal to facts, or emotional propaganda masquerading as persuasion. (3) To become irrelevant and seek the consolations of the political wilderness, in a windy and inward looking mysticism.

## Icon of Sacrifice

The individual must make the sacrifice as a substitute for the whole. Because Primitivism is ignored, their rhetoric becomes shrill and hysterical. The image of Ted Kaczynski, as the emblem of Primitivist self-sacrifice par excellence, becomes iconic here. Kaczynski rejected civilization, and went to live in a wooden hut out in the woods near Lincoln Montana, but was then arrested as the 'Unabomber', and is now incarcerated in the US supermax prison. Such a result was an inevitable outcome of his publishing the manifesto — in some way he courted his capture. As the ultimate emblem of Primitivist self-sacrifice, the status of the figure of Kaczynski within Primitivism becomes analogous to that of Jesus Christ within Christianity. Primitivist magazines, stickers and posters urge true believers to 'Be Like Ted'. Another picture makes the linkage even more explicit. 'He Tried to Save Us', with the white suited Kaczynski image assuming a Christ-type symbology.

## Substitute Religion

Most Primitivists have taken the third option outlined above, and sought the consolations of mysticism. Part of the basic belief framework draws on 'Deep Ecology' — the idea of nature having a distinctive value of and for itself. No surprise at all then, that some activist-Primitivists should be involved with the radical ecology of the Earth First! milieu. Others are involved with the anti-globalization movement, the

strand of which they have been most identified with being the 'Black-Bloc' — violent, confrontational protesters who wear black clothing and hoods, seen at Seattle in November 1999, and in Genoa in August 2001, the protest where Carlo Giuliani was killed by Italian riot police. At issue here is the true depth of influence of Primitivism within the 'Black-Bloc', with activist-Primitivists anxious to present themselves as its originators and core ideologues. The leading Primitivist 'Black-Bloc' publication was the Eugene *Black Clad Messenger*, but even during the course of writing and revising this introduction, further evidence of the burn-out of Primitivism came when news of the BCM's sad demise reached these shores.

# Consequences

> *A radical current that critiques the totality of civilization from an anarchist perspective, and seeks to initiate a comprehensive transformation of human life.*
>
> John Moore, *Primitivist Primer*

Primitivists refuse to engage with the problems of technology individually, preferring to demand an absolute, all or nothing rejection of technology in the round. One of their vanities is the claim that it is a *total* critique:

> *Ideologies such as Marxism, classical anarchism and feminism oppose aspects of civilization. Only anarcho primitivism opposes civilization, the context within which the various forms of oppression proliferate and become pervasive.*
>
> *Primitivist Primer*

Primitivism is a dead end. Because, in their vanity, they seek to address all our problems, they attack none. They are incapable of addressing our problems. With this absolutist all or nothing posture, Primitivists portray themselves as radicals and could potentially attract many converts. Yet by refusing to define their goals in concrete terms, the nebulous utopia they profess to seek exists only in the minds of true believers, and thus can be all things to all people, all promise, no delivery. Primitivism is in essence a chimera, a mirage. Primitivism is an illusion with no future.

# 3. The Preliminary Orientation: Moderning, Postmodernism and Primitivism

## The labyrinthine basement beneath the New Age Cybercafe

What exactly are the core beliefs of Primitivism? What sort of a future society / world do the Primitivists want? How do Primitivists intend to bring it into being? and even if they could, would anybody want this? When we answer these questions, I believe that people will come to see that Primitivism is a dead end, and hopefully they will not want to waste further time on it. Reportedly, the low point of the 23rd September 2000 John Zerzan talk in London was when Theresa Kintz, one of the meeting organisers, called for a campaign against electricity. If our enemies wanted to create something to make radical politics look utterly ridiculous and stupid, and prevent people from supporting us, or joining the struggle for positive change, they could do no worse than 'Primitivism'.

To give a complete history of Primitivist ideas lies far beyond the scope of this modest pamphlet. Instead, I would like to give a brief outline of the area, the context, the ground from which it springs. Wherever there has been 'civilization' and technology, there has probably been unease about these, from the time of the 'Epic of Gilgamesh' (c 2000 BC) onwards. This anxiety started to really cut about the time of the Industrial Revolution; Rousseau, particularly in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776–78) is one example. The Luddites (1812–14) are another.

## Alienation

Karl Marx, in his 1844[1] Paris Manuscript takes the concept of alienation from Fichte, Hegel and Feuerbach one stage further, applying this to economic life. Labour is realised in the loss of reality of the worker. 'The worker's misery is inversely proportional to the power and scope of his production' The worker is enslaved to the physical. Marx

[1] Karl Marx 'Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts', also called the 'Paris Manuscripts' (1844) 1st Manuscript, 'Alienated Labour'.

introduces the concept of 'species being' (*gattungswesen*), from which the worker is also alienated, carrying it with him. This becomes a falling short, a failure to realize his full potential, the reducing down of the person to a physical object, to be treated as a means and not an end.

This anxiety about civilization, society or technology has also been expressed culturally and philosophically. As long ago as 1874, Nietzsche, in 'Schopenhauer as Educator'[2] reacted against the runaway industrialization, the shift from country to cities, the vulgarization of newly unified Germany, when he wrote of a 'haste and hurry now universal', of the waters of religion 'ebbing away' leaving 'swamps and stagnant pools', of science 'dissolving belief', of the educated classes 'being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy'. 'Everything', Nietzsche proclaimed 'contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism'.[3]

The anxiety about civilization, technology, the pace of progress can be expressed culturally, as despair or pessimism, but it also came to the attention of psychologists. In his 'Civilization and Its Discontents', fifty six years after Nietzsche, (1930), Freud set out what might be the Primitivist slate when he wrote "what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions"[4]

Freud was no Primitivist, but wished to study the individual, and how he or she relates to the surrounding cultural, social environment. He writes of Thanatos and Libido, two forces competing, and of guilt. We know that this social context, this discontented civilization, includes such things as the World Wars, Hiroshima, and Auschwitz.

## Crisis

In 1936, Edmund Husserl, spoke and wrote about the crisis in the European sciences.[5] The European psyche was indeed gravely sick, and Nazism showed this. The defection of Husserl's former pupil, Martin Heidegger, to the Nazis, was a grave personal set back. Husserl was banished from the university, forbidden to publish, forced to give his lectures in Vienna and Prague. Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* deals with 'intersubjectivity'. How can the ego account for 'The Other'? Husserl also writes of the *Lebenswelt,* this common world of lived experience, which exists between people. In the face of the Nazi attack on rationality, or uncontrolled Idealism run rampant,

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* tr R J Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p 148

[3] Fritz Stern *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, University of California Press, 1961 deals with this theme, studying the work of Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn and Moeller van den Bruck.

[4] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Hogarth, London 1930, p 23.

[5] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis in European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr D Carr, Northwestern UP 1970

Husserl was seeking some unifying factor beyond the chaos. Science and psychology were criticised, inadequate. The 'Crisis' is real, the floodwaters are lapping at the door.

## Herbert Marcuse

The last figure I want to look at in this section, Herbert Marcuse, followed up on Freud, with his 'Eros and Civilization' (1955), is an important influence on Situationism, the critique of consumer culture, advertising, soap-operas, mass conformity, and is a pointer towards the beginnings of 1980s Primitivism in Detroit. As a pupil of Heidegger, Marcuse provides one link between the German pessimism and 'culture of despair' schools, and the Primitivist identification with these themes.

## One Dimensional Man

Marcuse gives us a clear road into understanding Primitivism. In his 'One Dimensional Man' (1964), Marcuse prefigures Primitivist themes, for example, as well as the critique of language, he shares some of their criticism of science. Marcuse writes from a time burdened down with scientific confidence; where managerialism, behaviourism, functionalism, advertising, mass culture, and huge militaristic, industrial forces were being marshalled for the Cold War. Workers' tasks were routine, mechanistic, and the workers were being replaced by machines. The concentration camp image is 'the quintessence of the infernal society into which we are plunged every day',[6] while concentration camp studies are taken up and applied to the nuclear bomb shelters. Here, nature must be quantified, all the better to enslave, dominate, colonize it. This is the world of Lewis Mumford's 'Technics', of B F Skinner, Vance Packard, Karl Popper, C P Snow and J K Galbraith; an automated, air-conditioned nightmare. Under this, all alternatives are closed off, especially through language (ideology, propaganda, advertising). The logic of protest is 'defeated', the unhappy consciousness is conquered, turned into a mere machine, a cog, and made to endlessly reproduce its own enslavement.

## Machine, Technology, Problems

We turn to look at Primitivism as it is in the present. Two big factors are at work here. One is the alienation, the diminishment of people, the second the downside of technology. The first can be felt in mass unemployment, poverty, psychoses, culture, anxiety, anger, despair, boredom, psychosomatic illnesses. We see the second, the technology problem on motorways, in traffic jams, pollution, the poverty of the urban

[6] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1964, p 75. Ellul makes similar points.

landscape. Sometimes when things blows up, fail, catch fire or crash — the Challenger space shuttle, Flixborough, Chernobyl, the *Titanic,* Aberfan, the Kings Cross underground fire, Bhopal, Three Mile Island — we see how thin it all is. Standing in the face of this reality, we can accept our limitedness and fallibility. Perhaps we can work together to make things better, to try to overcome these things. However, Primitivism does not make this choice but rather assumes they are inevitable, that civilization itself is the problem.

## Millennium Showdown

Political ideas must be tested, both for their internal consistency, their logic, but such theories also need to be tested against *facts*. We do not have to look far to see the Primtivist's failed apocalyptic prophecy. Whatever happened to the Millennium Bug for example? The Y2K problem was much covered in *GA*57–58, Autumn 1999, with a whole page given over to a disaster map of Britain and a list of the location of emergency government food bunkers. In an article 'Are you ready for the end of the world?'[7] On page 8, a timetable for doomsday was given:

> December 31st, Midnight. The fools of America are still in the streets when it hits. Half drunk, they don't realize why the lights went out. As the poor quickly realize 911 doesn't work, mass looting begins. They start with TVs, VCRs and stereos, all items that are worthless without electricity. The smart ones go for gun shops. Inspired by a new sense of lawlessness, gangs then go door to door, shooting first and asking questions later. Police will be helpless, and any family who decided against purchasing a firearm out of concern that 'guns are dangerous' now realize they're a lot more dangerous when the criminals have them and you don't. Many will die that night...

Elsewhere in the same article, it says: 'With Y2K, all it takes is a temporary cessation of production and break down of infrastructure and ingrained obedience, and the whole jobs fucked.' The case of Steve Watson, a US computer programmer who realised public utilities are driven by computers, is quoted. Watson took to living in an Oklahoma bunker, surrounded by M-16 rifles. 'Watson's behaviour is not that untypical of those in the know.' The article goes on to tell us. '60% admit there'll be a serious impact, and 20% said they'd be emptying their bank accounts before 1st Jan 2000. If you won't believe the programmer then what about the opinion of senior Territorial Army officers, warning of a full six months of civil disorder following Y2K? Perhaps in line with this, all police leave over the Millennium has been cancelled.'

The article goes on to discover that it's all dependent on electricity, computer chips. Water supplies, fuel oil distribution, railway signalling, cars, Windows 98, law and

[7] *GA* 57–58, Autumn 1999. 'Are You Ready For the End of the World?' was written by Paul Rogers.

order, cars, traffic signals, gridlock. 'Such a traffic block will last many days, perhaps weeks...' (oh yeah?) Fire engines, doctors, police gridlocked, fires lit by New Year revellers raging out of control. Fridges and deep freezers controlled by chips breaking down, and 'just in time' supermarket supply chains knocked by hoarding. 'From the above' the article says near its end, 'you'll appreciate peoples' simple, spontaneous struggle for survival will be enough to destroy the system.'

## *Schadenfreude*

Primitivism died shortly after midnight on the 31st December 1999, when this anticipated collapse of industrial society did not happen. At its core, Primitivists have a kind of *schadenfreude,* a glorying in the crises of industrial society. We know that civilization has many problems, among them; alienation, crime, insanity, drugs, violence, state oppression, secret police actions, pollution, global warming, gmos, capitalist exploitation, the nuclear industry and atomic weapons, the war machine, advertising, consumerism and propaganda. Primitivist critiques of such are marred by their rejection of technology as a whole. In the above quoted article, it also suggested that biological warfare agents, or scientific experiments might also put an end to civilization. If the power cuts and armed looters don't get you, Doomsday weapons involving meta-stable vacuums might.

Behind much of this, there is the error of an unwarranted shift from *some* to *all*. Sometimes we find our problems are tangled together like an electric extension lead. What is needed is to untwist the knots. It serves no useful purpose to stand at the side blaming the cable, or abstractly to complain about the 'totality of the intertwined configuration of wires.' So to with civilization. The answer is to get involved with the problems, and try to put them right. The answer is a different, sustainable, practical and realisable appropriate technology society, not this false hope of an unrealistic Primitivist utopia.

## Duty of Care

Sitting at your computer, at ten minutes to midnight on December 31st 1999, about to send an email or look at a website, would you really prefer the darkness and the rioting in the street option? Perhaps the Primitivists sincerely do, (this is one possibility) or maybe all that apocalyptic stuff is insincere, and cynical. The lack of real crisis over the Millennium Bug taught a valuable lesson. September 11th teaches another. It is one thing to criticise injustices and problems in society, but we should always remember that these people are our neighbours, and that we owe them a duty of care. We need practical work towards solutions, an honest, not a cynical, disdainful politics. Within Primitivism, there is the hope that civilization might crash down, but this is

not the same thing as the knowledge that it will. The confusion between these two is particularly clear in the Millennium Bug example. The many problems of civilization have particular causes, particular effects and consequences. These can be studied and tackled. Rather than trouble themselves with the problems individually and in detail, the Primitivist blames civilization itself, a wider abstraction. Everything is wrong. It is 'easier' to throw the baby out with the water than to change the water.

## A Developed World Counsel of Despair

In the middle of a blanket rejection of technology, it would be interesting to read a Primitivist critique of Trevor Baylis and his clockwork radio. This points up the fact that Primitivism is a political theory for the alienated First World. Would you get the same absolute hostility to, and rejection of technology in the Third World? Stuff your clean drinking water, stuff your drugs to prevent river blindness, stuff your appendix operations, stuff your safe childbirth and reduction in infant mortality. It is true that *some* (perhaps many) technology products are harmful or not wanted in the Third World — the Narmada Dam project eg, Bhopal, the burning of the rain forest, but again we have to watch the unwarranted shift from *some* to *all*. Essentially the same problems apply to these as we find in the west. It is deeply patronising and elitist to try to deny Third World people the choice, by condemning technology as a whole. Primitivism could only be the product of spoiled Western college kids sitting in the middle of a sea of plenty, and cursing it. Primitivism is a developed-world counsel of despair.

## No Social Dimension

We need to examine Primitivists, not just for what they say, but also for what Primitivists *do*, for what they *are*. A strong criticism of Primitivism is that hitherto they have been unable to cohere into a positive political grouping. It is anti-social in tendency. Without this social aspect it is powerless to bring about change. The UK 'Primitivist Network' and its journal, *The Missing Link* soon folded. In the introductory section of this pamphlet, I have already mentioned *GA's* spiral of decline. Similarly, in the USA, John Zerzan, for example, counsels the refusal of community: 'The refusal of community might be termed a self-defeating isolation but it appears preferable, healthier than declaring our allegiance to the daily fabric of an increasingly self-destructive world.'[8] But this is a false dilemma, it is not an either/or choice, with just these two alternatives. In his article, 'Why I am Not a Primitivist' Jason Mc-

[8] John Zerzan, *Community* in GA52, Summer 1998, p8.

Quinn[9] rightly questions the Primitivists' capacity to change things if they can only attract 'marginalised malcontents'. As I will discuss below, there is a Stirnerite tendency within Primitivism (Feral Faun) and a Nihilistic strand. Critics of Primitivism have rightly rounded on their long-windedness, their obtuse, opaque language. Primitivism, as a political cult, reaps the rewards of its non-committed ambiguity. Here, Primitivism expresses a severe form of radical paralysis. Connected with this, others see Primitivists adopting postures of barbarism while secretly holding ambitions to insinuate themselves inside the humanities departments of the universities.

## Strategy of Obscurity

It might be a new form of the old 'Elephant Repellent' scam, or a variation of the 'Emperor's New Clothes' strategy, that if no one can yet understand what the invisible cloth is, no one can claim that it does not exist. One aspect of the deliberate and calculated obscurity of Primitivist theory is that it readily facilitates the defensive tactic of the 'Straw Man Evasion' whereby critics of Primitivism are said to have not understood it, and have attacked views not really held by Primitivists. The clearest example of this in operation is that along with the anthropological material extolling 'Primitive Affluence' and the virtues of the life-ways of the !Kung or San Kalahari Bushmen, we also find the denial that Primitivism is a call to go back to the Stone Age; Just *what* is it that Primitivists want then?

> *The aim is* not *to replicate or return to the primitive, merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy.*[10]

is one form of this denial. In what way will the Primitivist utopia be like the primitive, and in what way not?

> *Let us anticipate the critics who would accuse us of wanting to go 'back to the caves' or of mere posturing on our part — ie enjoying the comforts of civilization all the while being its harshest critics. We are not positing the Stone Age as a model for our utopia, nor are we suggesting a return to gathering and hunting as a means for our livelihood ... All of us desire central heating, flush toilets and electric lighting, but not at the expense of our humanity. Maybe they are possible together, but maybe not.*[11]

*Fifth Estate* tell us in an early article. These statements are intended to counter an obvious objection, but if they are not positing a return to the stone age, of what

[9] Jason McQuinn 'Why I am Not A Primitivist' *Anarchy A Journal of Desire Armed*, USA, Spring 2001

[10] John Moore, *Primitivist Primer*, GA 47/48 Summer 1997, p 18.

[11] 'Searching For The Culprit' *Fifth Estate* 298, June 1979, p 6.

relevance is all the anthropological stuff? In my opinion, the only viable reading of Primitivism is that their apologetic or rhetorical strategy is to deny they are calling for the return, and then carry on making the call.

Hakim Bey seeks refuge in semantic subterfuge, advocating a return *of* rather than *to* the Palaeolithic.[12] This however only serves to reinforce the externality of what is on offer here, a return *to* something is a thing we do actively, under a return *of* something, we become the passive element, a return of the Palaeolithic period is something outside, something which is done to us.

## The 'So What' Counter Move

If all of these Primitivist theorists are at base double-minded about whether they want a literal or metaphorical return, other Primitivist writers are more up-front and in your face on this, and admit they are making the call but then say 'So What?' or 'Up Yours' to this objection:

> *The point is that it* has *happened — green anarchy*[13] *was how people lived for a good 90% of history, how they lived before they were even* homo sapiens*, how some still live better* [14] *than we do today. When we point this out people start pissing and whining about 'going back to the caves' and getting protective about their TVs, cars and other fruits of 'progress'*[15]

Then there are those who advocate a return to a primitive condition in some kind of existential or 'spiritual' sense. John Moore, for example, in 'Coming Home'[16] refers to Fredy Perlman calling on people to dance:

> *This seemingly innocuous point encapsulates a key aspect of anarcho-primitivism, the sense that the primitive is here and now, rather than far away and long ago.*

## The Straw Man Returns

The second aspect of the deliberate and calculated obscurity of Primitivist theory and another example of the Straw Man Evasion is the Primitivist denial that it is an ideology. This move is used to try to counter objections to Primitivism, by claiming

[12] Hakim Bey *The Return of the Palaeolithic* GA39, Autumn 1995, p7.

[13] Refer to the introductory section, footnote [*1*] re the dispute over whether GA always was Primitivist. Notice that Rogers here identifies Primitivism with green anarchy.

[14] Note the value judgement here.

[15] Paul Rogers' introductory article on Primitivism, *GA* 38, Summer 1995, p 7.

[16] John Moore 'Comin Home', GA 38

that it goes beyond all that. In marketing terms, the claim is an important selling point. In issue 45/46, the 'Anti-Ideology' so-called double issue of *Green Anarchist*, we are told that 'ideology can never create a free society'[17] So therefore, if Primitivism is a claim to create a free society, it cannot be an ideology. Ideology is seen as keeping the faithful in check, and 'you have ideas, ideology has you'.

> *Individuals associated with this current do not wish to be adherents of an ideology, merely people who seek to become free individuals in free communities, in harmony with one another and with the biosphere, and may therefore refuse to be limited by the term 'anarcho-primitivism' or any other ideological tagging.*[18]

We see here one of the important themes, the Postmodern refusal to be tied down, to be committed to something meaningful. Ideology is a bad thing, something to be avoided. Elsewhere, the accusation that Communism is an ideology is enough to scupper it, in Camatte and Collu's *On Organization*[19] This hostility towards ideology will be discussed in more detail below.

## Double Aspect

To conclude this section, it is by no means clear whether Primitivists demand a literal or a metaphorical return to the Stone Age. If the call for a 'homecoming' is not literal however, the real function of the anthropological material must be called into question. Like Wittgenstein's ambiguous figure, the Duck-Rabbit, the treatment of anthropology within Primitivist theory has a double aspect; outwardly, under the primary aspect, it mimics or parodies scientific discourse. We are expected to believe the anthropology in the same way as if it were science. This is how it is treated, this is how it is regarded, and how it appeals to scientific prestige.

Yet the secondary aspect, the one which really does the work, is that the anthropology material is to be regarded as a genre of religious, iconic text. This attitude of veneration explains Rogers/ Kintz's hysterical reaction to the criticism of John Zerzan made in the 'Primitive Confusion' pamphlet.[20] Marielle and Alain C have committed heresy and blasphemy against the Primitivist icons. When we consider these two aspects together, the scientific and the religious, again we understand the way Primitivism is an attempt both to have the cake and to eat it. There is a constant switch taking place between the two. If we have to find a place for Primitivism, it really

[17] GA 45/46, Spring 1997, page 9.

[18] Moore *Primitivist Primer*.

[19] Camatte and Collu *On Organization*, GA45/46, p 10.

[20] Alain C and Marielle, *John Zerzan and the Primitive Confusion,* Chronos publications, 2000. The demand to print Kintz's review of this pamphlet was made in Paul Rogers' correspondence at the time of the split.

belongs to the register of affectation, of putting on fakery, of postures, of theatrical insincerity. All this double-mindedness has a price, a grave cost to the understanding. Primitivists are doomed continually to fight the retreat from the last ditches of ambiguity back towards the high ground of meaninglessness.

# Ideology

In this section, I want to begin by stepping back from looking directly at Primitivism, and to see the wider context. We need to understand the stagnant pools that these fish are flapping about in.

We all make attempts to describe the world around us, to analyze society, or make judgements about politics or the economy. People offer 'answers' ranging from an intensification of the status quo across to radical or revolutionary politics, Syndicalism, Marxism and Anarchism. Where we go wrong here is that by narrowing down our perspective to some variant of the doctrinal 'one size fits all' panacea mindset, we ignore other, external facts and processes. We all laugh at faddist cranks who proclaim the solution to all the world's ills lies in only eating peanuts and nothing else, but all of us have probably been guilty of the same type of error at some time. The term 'Ideology' lurks in the background here.

# No Air From An Alien Planet

A word of caution is needed. There are two senses of the term 'ideology' and many of the problems we have in this area stem from switching between the two. The switch or slide may be voluntary, deliberate, made as a consciously deceitful rhetorical trick, or it may be involuntary and unnoticed. The first (the narrow) sense of 'ideology' is neutral and uncontroversial; a term we use to describe a particular network of ideas, principles, observations and the like, (eg Marxism). The second sense of 'ideology' (the broad sense) is problematic, because it is applied to *all* systems of thinking. In this sense, everything is ideological, ideology is inescapable. Marcuse describes this condition, quoting Stefan George, searching, but ourselves no longer able to find 'air from an alien planet.'[21] It is this second understanding of ideology from which the Primitivists are attempting to escape.

# Paradox

Ideology is generally seen as a 'bad thing' but why? There is a general view that people holding to an Ideology share in a community of illusion. Ideology is widely

[21] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p 63.

understood as a closed, dogmatic system of thinking, as false consciousness (Karl Marx or Raymond Williams eg) as a rationalization / justification for the exercising of power (Anthony Giddens Foucault) and the masking of interests. There is a paradox here with ideology, particularly when we make the switch between the narrow and broad senses of the word. For on the one side ideology fills the plenum, it is everywhere and inescapable, yet from the time of the Enlightenment onwards, the perception here has been of the relativistic fragmentation of knowledge.

To adopt the metaphor, the gulf between the planets is unbridgeable. Moving metaphors from space down to horticulture, the upshot of these two paradoxical states is that it is all very fragile, like glass. Epistemology is brittle, ideological rivalry between the growers has been intense, and the quest has long been on for new kinds of vandal proof greenhouse glass behind which one can cower after hurling large rocks at the vulnerable.

## Bi-polarity

I am still describing the general area in which Primitivism is located and must be understood. Karl Mannheim[22] interpreted this problem of social critique along a bi-polar dimension of Ideology / Utopia. Both of these struck up an attitude towards the status quo; of ideologues within, that they were blind to inconvenient facts; of utopians without, that they only saw the inconvenient facts. We find elements of both of these in Primitivism; Utopianism in their idolization of the primitive world; Ideology in their criticism of industrial-technological civilization.

## Ideology or Egology?

The ego is challenged by ideologies. Now, there are three basic responses to this fact. The first, most common reaction is to subordinate yourself to a particular ideology (but which one?) and to use this as a base from which to assail the others. The second type of response might be to refuse to play, and step outside all this with scepticism or nihilism. The third could be to attempt to set up an Ideology of your own and to seek followers.

## Ideological product placement

**Modernists only really live in that shimmering, yet to be formed part. There is always this tension, instability and doubt between possessing this week's gadget and knowing that you do not yet possess next week's new**

[22] Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, Routledge, London 1936, p 36.

**thing. The battle over *what* can legitimately occupy that shimmering part is what it is all about...**

The case of Nietzsche is particularly interesting here, because it combines elements of both the second and third. In reaction to this perceived fragmentation of knowledge, in his characteristically hyperbolic way, Nietzsche sought an overturning — the 'Transvaluation of All Values'. This can help us to understand what is happening with Ideologies today, when we relate them to the registers of Prometheanism and megalomania. Since Nietzsche, many and various unpleasant permutations of epistemological scepticism, relativism and calls to embrace the chaos have circled round the market-place of ideas and have been much in vogue.

# Modernism

One of the strongest of all the -isms, and our key to understanding here, is Modernism. By this I mean something broader, more profound and contemporary than 'Parker, Pound and Picasso', the Bauhaus, Jackson Pollock, or John Cage. 'Modernism' is embraced by, and influences this whole world we find ourselves in — not just of architecture, art, pop music, Hollywood and other culture, but also of science and technology — microwave ovens, computers, washing machines, telecommunications, credit cards, hi-tech weaponry, nuclear weapons, stealth planes, airliners. All of these are examples of Modernism, but global capitalism, international stock exchanges, chain stores, shopping malls also share its features. A distinctive feature of Modernism is that under it, we must keep moving forwards. Each gadget becomes obsolete and is replaced. Companies must introduce new products, WAP phones or DVD players, or die.

Like a shark, Modernism must keep swimming forwards. Think about the disdain with which yesterday's gadget is treated, the negative value judgement being made against it. This is something more than just a basic fact of capitalist economics, because it is also cultural. The intellectual aspect of this — the way individuals absorb this attitude into their minds and allow it to govern, not just their actions and their credit card transactions, but also their thinking, their ideas, the things people say to each other, the whole network of values they hold together, is important here.

Modernism is 'Shimmering', a little like the distant Emerald City, and those who buy into it are doomed to forever progress along the Yellow Brick Road, and never arrive. Modernists only really live in that shimmering, yet to be formed part — there is always this tension, this instability and doubt between possessing this week's gadget and knowing that you do not yet possess next week's.

# Postmodernism

A possible displacement strategy, evasion, way of not dealing with that tension, is to stand 'outside' Modernism, (as a posture) and sneer at it. "All this chasing after next week's new thing is so *tedious* — but as it happens, I actually have got it, because I nipped into Ikea this afternoon...." Postmodernists, as believers in a cultural, intellectual trend, are too knowing to naively buy into Modernism, but yet again, do so from an ironic distance. Going back to that search for the vandal proof greenhouse glass (only £9:99p from B & Q ?) going back — or rather going one better, Postmodernists proclaim the demise of the 'Grand Narrative' and replace this with a grand narrative of reports about fragmentation, chaos and scepticism. Unable to find that Archimedian Point on which to stand and judge the rest, they jeer at the very thought that there could be such a place, and then buy the gadget just in case.

Thinking about the history of ideological product placement, we find a whole catalogue of -isms — Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Semiotics and Deconstruction — all consigned to the graveyard of obsolete critical theory, their tomes gathering dust on the library shelves, in just the same way as two month old CDs are thrown into the landfill site, or remaindered books stack up in the cut price bookshop, or Windows 98 replaces Windows 95. As with the physical products, so too with the intellectuals. The quest is on for that product which can sit comfortably in the shimmering part of Modernism, but which will *never* grow obsolete. What we need is some sort of overarching -ism. After all, what could be more up to date, what could be more 'modern' than what comes after Modernism?

The quest is on for the theoretical Holy Grail. Perhaps they have found it with Postmodernism. Po-mo, as a subset of Modernism, shimmers ironically in that space between the new, the newest, the nowest and the next.

# Primitivism

So how do Modernism and Postmodernism relate to Primitivism? Here I offer several hypotheses which will be examined in more detail later. One theory about Primitivism is that it expresses an alienated, rather angry dialectical inversion of Modernism. Another route to understanding it is to consider that in the same way that po-mo is an outgrowth of Modernism, in turn, Primitivism is a development of Postmodernism. A dialectical opposite of Modernism could be to, not just stand outside and sneer at the purchasing process (while rushing into Ikea) but go one better and reject all that by calling for a 'return' to something else, the hunter-gatherers of the Stone Age. The fact human beings lived this way for thousands of years has some sort of static permanence, an eternal validity. Could Primitivism be an Archimedian Point outside the swirling Modernist Inferno?

It is all about Ideological product placement, about that shimmering gap between now and next week. What kind of ideology could fill this, while at the same time break free of, stand aloof from the eternal recurrence of the Saturday morning visit to Next, the Sunday Supplement fashion check, the afternoon trolley push at Do It All, the end of the month credit card statement? How do we escape from the constant kaleidoscope of the new, novel, and exciting?

## Raiding the Rat Maze

What is Postmodernism? Its first feature is the denigration of truth. 'Truth is a social construct'. 'What is neither true nor false is reality' (Derrida).[23] Taking the cue from Nietzsche, we find Perspectivism, relativism. We find the refusal to make distinctions. It is undifferentiated, the same shopping malls or motorways, Coca-Cola and McDonalds are everywhere. There is no way to measure the difference, arbitrarily the universe shifts shape, things merge and separate. Lyotard attacked the notion of linear time. There is a forgetting of the past, the liquidation of the previous moment. Fukuyama wrote of 'The End of History.' It has not stopped, but runs ever faster and faster, wrapped up into itself. There is a denigration of the real. The real world is an error (Nietzsche) a fiction.[24] Baudrillardian Hyper-reality is a nullification, a 'wired world'. We find a denigration of the self. Lacan wrote of the self as a fiction, disappearing in a hall of mirrors. Roland Barthes wrote of the 'Death of the Author'. Though the self is abolished, the theorist to a shamen, witch doctor, mystagogue, snake charmer. Paul de Man, Professor of Deconstruction at Yale, in 1988 was found to have concealed how in WW2 he wrote over 100 anti-semitic articles in a collaborationist Belgian newspaper. Heidegger in his Rectoral Address notoriously supported the Nazis. We cannot question them, because morality has been abolished. The *Maitre d' Penser* is elevated to a limboland (?) perhaps a hyper-reality beyond criticism, to a spurious, demi-god-like status. Perhaps because of this, there is this unease over representation counterbalanced by this vainglorious declaration of the primacy of text — Borges likens it to a map so large, it first covers and then *becomes* the territory. 'we have no access to reality except through concepts, codes, categories.' (Derrida) We find fragmentation, eclecticism, cannibalism, plagiarism, recycling, cut n' paste bricolage. Scepticism, collapse of the 'Grand Narrative', (Lyotard, Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes and Foucault) There is a loss of the centre, a breaking up of things (Deconstruction), not a single trunk but crabgrass, tiny tangled roots shooting everywhere (Deleuze and Guattari) Everywhere is irony, (Umberto Eco, Charles Jencks) pastiche, cynicism, parody, satire.

The key to unlock this puzzle is the Primitivist understanding of time as circular, non-linear. The doctrine of the circular, cyclic nature of time is found in Nietzsche.

[23] Jacques Derrida, *ThePost Card From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,* 1980

[24] Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, tr Kauffmann, section 481.

'Everything straight lies. All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.'[25] In Primitivist writing, the cyclic is contrasted with the linear view of time, the linear view being held by Leviathanic societies. Stanley Diamond for example:

> *In machine-based societies, the machine has incorporated the demands of the civil power or of the market, and the whole life of society, of all classes and grades, must adjust to its rhythms. Time becomes lineal, secularised, precious, and it is reduced to an extension in space that must be used up, and sacred time disappears.*[26] And in 'Coming Home',[27] John Moore takes a similar view.

If time is circular, a return to origins is also the future. Even the title of John Zerzan's book *Future Primitive* shows this up. What is long past is also ahead. An early issue of *Green Anarchist* back at the start of its Primitivist phase[28] declared 'Civilization is backwards. Primitive societies are Advanced!' and thereby exposed the whole Primitivist ambition to occupy the shimmering part of Modernism, to be the newest, and non-replaceable ideological product, a belief system which could never be made obsolete.

[25] Friedrich Nietzsche 'Of the Vision and the riddle' *Zarathustra*, Penguin tr p 178
[26] Stanley Diamond 'In Search of the Primitive' *GA* 42, Summer 1996, p9.
[27] John Moore, *Comin Home* GA38, p8.
[28] GA 38, Summer 1995, p 7

# 4. Zerzan, FC and Moore: Three Mandarin Primitivist Thinkers

## Twilight of the Idols

### John Zerzan

> *Hic Rhodus!* This is the place to jump, the place to dance! This is the wilderness! Was there any other? This is savagery! Do you call it freedom? This is barbarism!
>
> Fredy Perlman *Against History Against Leviathan,* Black & Red, Detroit, 1983

The festering inferiority of Fredy Perlman as a writer is straightforward. The influence of Norman Cohn *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and of Lewis Mumford's *Myth of the Machine / The Pentagon of Power* is clear. For all the hagiographic hype about Perlman as the founding father of US Primitivism, quickly, we can see his derivative character. The case of John Zerzan is more obscure. That Zerzan is the most praised of all the Primitivist writers, even by enemies of Primitivism like *Black Flag*, remains a distinct puzzle. Why? — Because his work almost entirely consists of quotations and references to other writers. Quite a mixed bag of figures too, moving from the well known, like Horkheimer and Adorno, to completely obscure.

> *To know time is to fear it, and to know civilized time is to be terror stricken.*
>
> John Zerzan, quoting Loren Eisely,[1]

Quoting others in itself is not necessarily wrong, however Zerzan does not stay long enough to place what these sages are allegedly saying in their proper context. Annoyingly, in the Zerzanian texts I have seen, he does not give specific references, and so the diligent reader is not able to check them out. This in itself ought to set alarm bells ringing, but it is this 'Wall of Culture' (Alain C and Marielle) which I believe is the real reason why superficial analysts praise him. Interesting though, at this stage to recognize that Zerzan hides behind *culture*, something he professes to despise.

[1] John Zerzan *Elements of Refusal* Left Bank Books, 1988, p19

## Defective Methodology

In the second stage of an analysis of the Zerzanian Corpus, we must strip away all the quotations and non-specific references, and try to get to the meaning underneath. In doing this, we are left with very little, and what we find is banal and second rate in the extreme. The best way of working would have been to have a bold theory, to state it clearly, and give the arguments for it, citing evidence. A Primitivist book written along these lines would have been something to behold! Only after the theory, the evidence and the proof, would it have then been proper to cite secondary literature to support the view, but with Zerzan we do not get this. Let's move right on to the secondary sources! It really needs to stand up in its own right. Zerzan puts the cart before the horse. There are so many quotations that the reader begins to feel giddy, and then begins to doubt whether Zerzan really has any thoughts of his own. Nasty evidence! Horrid Aristotelian syllogisms! Disgusting Enlightenment emphasis on reason! Despicable dependency on the tools of logic! Scientific call for structure, for clear methodological validity! Where's the peer review? — Whadya mean kid, ya just *aren't* gonna take my — I mean *our* word for it?

## Derivative

> Zerzan on Marcuse: "Therein lies a deep, if inchoate critique."
>
> The Mass Psychology of Misery', *Future Primitive*, p 47

In part 6 I will deal with Zerzan's supposedly ground-breaking critique of language, but here, I wish to examine his broader relationship with the work of Herbert Marcuse.

In 1930, Sigmund Freud published *Civilization and its Discontents,*[2] Here, Freud wrote of the 'oceanic feeling', a concept of a mental condition or spiritual state which is important in Primitivism, of consciousness merging with the primal wilderness, perhaps somewhat akin to Nirvana in Buddhism. Freud linked the 'oceanic feeling' with limitless narcissism.[3] In Chapter 3, Freud wrote of the people who want to escape from what society has become: "What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions."[4] Central to Freud's view is a bi-polar conflict between the libido and thanatos, the death-instinct; this was also seen in the conflict inside the primal family of *Totem and Taboo*, (1912–13) and in this work is tied up with civilization itself as a wider 'family', weighed down with guilt at the killing of the primal father.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, tr Joan Riviere, Hogarth Press, London 1930
[3] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p 9
[4] Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p 23

## Marcuse

One of the foremost political thinkers of the left in the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) studied at Freiburg under Heidegger, and was influenced by the Marxist Frankfurt Institute for Social Studies. After Hitler came to power, Marcuse fled to the USA. After WW2, he taught at Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis, and at San Diego universities. In his 1955 work *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse takes Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* a stage further. Some of what Freud said in the earlier work clearly referred back to the horrors of WW1; poison gas, trench warfare and atrocities against civilians; but his comments about human destructiveness pre-date the Holocaust. Chapter 6 of the Freud book deals with aggression and sadism, the death instinct. Marcuse, using this as a starting point, writes with knowledge of the greater horror of Auschwitz, and Hiroshima, which of course, Freud did not know.

## Destructive

Marcuse uses critical Marxist theory to examine Eros and Thanatos on these facts, which he describes as "the fatal dialectic of civilization." We are seeing "progressively increasing destructive forces released."[5] This from a period when Cold War rivalry produced bigger and bigger H Bombs, but also when affluence, waste and the planned obsolescence of the consumer society were never stronger. "But the truth is that this freedom and satisfaction are transforming the earth into hell."

## One Dimensional Zerzan

In his forward for the 1969 edition, Marcuse makes the comparison between Auschwitz and Vietnam. The military industrial complex, science and the media are a single, unified entity. Mass manipulation leads to the containment of all opposing forces. "the question of whether the abolition of this whole is not the precondition for the emergence of a truly human city, state, nation."[6] Marcuse expanded on this in his 1964 classic work, *One Dimensional Man.* The main difference between Marcuse and Zerzan is that the latter comes from a disillusioned, post 1968 stand-point, is cynical and postmodern.

## Hot Delicious — Cold Disgusting

Deep down, Zerzan is essentially rehashed Marcuse. On reading *One Dimensional Man,* and then comparing this with Zerzan, the resemblance is striking. I recommend that all of you try this for yourselves, and I am sure you will see the point. It is

[5] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud,* Beacon Press, Boston USA 1955, Abacus, London 1969, p 52.

[6] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p 16.

quite easy to set texts from one author alongside the other, and as a sort of 'Blindfold Test' invite people to say which is which. (see below) Readers may draw their own conclusions from this exercise. The resemblance is one, not just of content or theme, but also of tone. As we go on with this approach, more clearly, we come to see that conceptually, Zerzan is no advance on Marcuse, and in fact in many ways, is inferior to him, yet Marcuse wrote 20 or 30 years before Zerzan.

# Who is the real Zerzan?

It is important to stress here that I am not saying that Marcuse is the *only* influence on Zerzan. It is clear that there have been others; Sahlins and Lee for the 'primitive affluence' anthropology, Junger, Mumford and Ellul on technics, the Structural Anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, and as discussed above, Postmodernism[7] to give just a handful. What I am saying here is that (i) Zerzan's work shows clear evidence that he has greatly been influenced by Marcuse; and (ii) that Marcuse is the better thinker. When we look at Zerzan's writing, we find many layers, each of which is like a mask inside a mask. We have Zerzan the anthropologist, Zerzan the critic of technology, Zerzan the psychoanalyst who puts industrial society on the couch. We have Zerzan the critic of culture, Zerzan the Phenomenologist, Zerzan the Heideggerian Existentialist, Zerzan the Postmodernist cynic. Which of them is real? Peeling off the layers, somewhere near the core of it, we find Marcuse. So, we move on to the 'Blindfold Test':

## On Technology

> *The totalitarian universe of technological rationality is the latest transmutation of the idea of Reason ... I shall try to identify some of the main stages in the development of this idea — the process by which logic became the logic of domination.* [8]
>
> *The point which I am trying to make is that science by virtue of its own method and concepts, has projected and promoted a universe in which domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man — a link which tends to be fatal to this universe as a whole.*

[7] At this point it is necessary to indicate a possible ambiguity. Zerzan has at times referred to 'Junger'. Sometimes this refers to Ernst Junger, a well known German writer. There is also another, more obscure — Friedrich Georg Junger, author of *Maschine und Eigentum*, Frankfurt am Main, 1946; and *Die Perfektion Der Technik*, Frankfurt, V Klostermann, 1949; this latter translated as *The Failure of Technology: Perfection Without Purpose*, tr F D Wieck, Regnery, Hinsdale, Illinois USA, 1949. In his usual way, Zerzan also cites this author, but over and above the name check, it is not clear what exactly he has drawn from him.

[8] Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Routledge, London, 1964 (=ODM) second quote ODM, p 104, third quote ODM, p 119, fourth Marcuse, ODM p 138.

*The limits of this rationality, and its sinister force, appear in the progressive enslavement of man by a productive apparatus which perpetuates the struggle for existence and extends it to a total international struggle which ruins the lives of those who build and use this apparatus.*

*The world tends to become the stuff of total administration, which absorbs even the administrators. The web of domination has become the web of reason itself, and this society is fatally entangled in it.*

*Technology is the sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of the separations mediating us from each other.*[9]

*Infinitely more on target was Marcuse when he suggested in 1964 that 'the very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological. Not only the application of technology, but technology itself is domination.'.* [10]

Marcuse's critique of technology as a web of domination brings to mind similar thinkers, like Ellul and Mumford. Marcuse's thinking can be placed within the historical context — the Cold War and the affluent society. Zerzan's focus is further back, in the palaeolithic, at the dawn of civilization, with the steps of the introduction of agriculture and symbolization, leading to alienation. (Notice how alienation is built into the definition). Marcuse's critique therefore looks at, and grows out of close empirical observation of present reality. It is true that Zerzan has some regard for that too, but his principle orientation is reconstructive, and speculative. Marcuse's view is outwardly directed, towards society. Zerzan's is inwards, self-orientated.

## Against the Supposed Neutrality of Technology

*An electronic computer can serve equally a capitalist or socialist administration; a cyclotron can be an equally efficient tool for a war party or a peace party. This neutrality is contested in Marx's controversial statement that the 'handmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist.'* [11]

*Pure science is not applied science; it retains its identity and validity apart from its utilization. Moreover, this notion of the existential neutrality of science is also extended to technics. The machine is indifferent towards the social uses to which it is put, provided those uses remain within its technical capabilities.*

*Those who still say that technology is 'neutral' 'merely a tool' have not yet begun to consider what is involved. Junger, Adorno and Horkheimer, Ellul*

[9] John Zerzan 'On Technology' GA42 p 8, Summer 1996
[10] Zerzan, *Future Primitive* page 138.
[11] First quote, Marcuse, ODM, pp 126–127 second quote, Marcuse, ODM, p 127

*and a few others over the past decades, not to mention the crushing, all but unavoidable truth of technology in its global and personal toll — have led to a deeper approach to the topic.*[12]

*Technology has never been neutral like some discrete tool detachable from its context. It always partakes of and expresses the basic values of the social system in which it is embedded. Technology is the language, the texture, the embodiment of the social arrangements it holds together — the idea that it is neutral, that it is separable from society, is one of the biggest lies available. It is obvious why those who defend the high tech death trap want us to believe that technology is somehow neutral.* [13]

The derivative character of Zerzan's view on this is apparent: for example the references to Junger, Adorno, Horkheimer and Ellul, as an appeal to authority. Zerzan is utterly dependent on others for his thoughts. Similarly defective is the attempt to brow-beat us into agreement through suggestions of stupidity; 'have not yet begun to consider...' and through value judgements 'deeper approach...' and suggestions of duplicity 'biggest lies...' 'It is obvious why...' Marcuse, by contrast, describes the situation.

## On Literature

*Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation, literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction — the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed.*[14]

Quoting Thomas McFarland: *Culture primarily witnesses the absence of meaning, not its presence.*[15]

*Now, instead of concern for how we fail culture, the emphasis is on how culture has failed us.*[16]

*Culture embodies the split between wholeness and the parts of the whole turning into domination. Time, language, number, art — cultural impositions that have come to dominate us with lives of their own.*

Marcuse, rightly, believes in the possibility of literature being used to tell the truth about the human condition. Marcuse believes in the possibility of an external standpoint. Zerzan does not, and sees art in a wholly negative way. (Compare his view

[12] Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p 138.

[13] Zerzan, quoted by John Filiss, on Ken Knabb 'The Poverty of Primitivism' website.

[14] Marcuse, ODM, p 60

[15] John Zerzan, 'Running on Emptiness — The Failure of Symbolic Thought', GA 45–46, p 22ff Spring 1997.

[16] First quote Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p 141, second FP p 142.

with that of John Moore). Marcuse, again, has a social dimension, whereas Zerzan is self-orientated, selfish. Consider why he believes that culture has failed him. All this delivered to your door, but it still isn't enough... This is the voice of those spoiled college kids, drowning in the middle of a sea of plenty. If you don't like the stuff on offer, the challenge of culture is to create something better yourself.

## On Art

> *The spectre that has haunted the artistic consciousness since Mallarme, the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative — has ceased to be a spectre. It has materialised.*[17]
>
> *Pictorial representations roused the belief in controlling loss, the belief in coercion itself.*[18]
>
> *Art anaesthetises the sense organs and removes the natural world from their purview.*
>
> *Art not only creates the symbols of and for a society, it is a basic part of the symbolic matrix of estranged social life.*
>
> *Where the modern's gods might inhabit the eland, the buffalo, or the blade of grass, the Neanderthal's spirit was the animal or the grass blade, the thing and its soul perceived as a single vital force, with no need to distinguish them with separate names. Similarly the absence of artistic expression does not preclude the apprehension of what is artful about the world. Neanderthals did not paint their caves with the images of animals. But perhaps they had no need to distill life into representations, because its essences were already revealed to their senses. The sight of a running herd was enough to inspire a surging sense of beauty. They had no drums or bone flutes, but they could listen to the booming rhythms of the wind, the earth, and each other's heartbeats, and be transported.*[19]

Art is linked to alienation, loss, and Zerzan also criticises it for breaking down the primal unity of the senses. Marcuse sees art as under threat. The domain is shrinking, but there still *is* a domain. There is a dialectic — art is alienation, but also can be an affirmation, though the artists are in danger of selling out to the Wallace Greenbergs. It is not so much 'We'll always have Paris' as 'We'll always have Beckett and Ionesco.' Zerzan on the other hand, sees no hope at all in art, art equals alienation, and we must seek immediacy in the raw experience of the primal moment. I have included the long quotation here, because I believe this to be the strongest statement of Primitivist belief

[17] Marcuse, ODM, p 66.
[18] All three quotes here: Zerzan, *The Case Against Art*, GA 52, Summer 1998, p 6.
[19] John Zerzan, 'Running on Emptiness' GA45-46, Spring 1997, p 22.

in any of the literature. If asked to cite a passage which represents the very essence of Primitivism, it would be this. Now, it is always a good policy, if you wish to attack a belief system, to take it on on its strongest point. There are several things that could be said about the passage asserting this wish to merge with the primal wilderness. Some will think it completely whacky, and some could feel the same 'pass the sick bag' type of contempt engendered by the Perlman quote about dancing. Others will laugh, thinking that if this is the strongest expression of Primitivism, I must be joking. There is something in all these reactions, but wait... Isn't there also something poetic about this passage? Suppose we reconsider this piece as art?

## Speculative

Potential recruits may read this passage and decide to become Primitivists on the strength of it. Thus, Primitivist writings may have the capacity to influence people, encourage them to change their behaviour. What does the purple passage about the eland and buffalo tell us about the condition of being primitive? Admittedly, it is speculative, 'might', 'perhaps', 'could' — but just suppose for a moment, that it tells us something *true* about these conditions? What then?

## Epimenides The Cretan Rides Again

The conclusion we might draw from such a thought experiment is that Zerzan has succeeded in creating a work of art, and in this day and age too. A miracle! But there is more — this art tells us something true about primal conditions, and it also points towards action leading us out of this present mess. But if so, what does this tell us about Zerzan's critique of art, as a promise always broken and such? Zerzan's view about the absolute hopelessness and falsity of art, and his use of art to present the truth and the hope about his primal alternative cannot both be true.

## On Language

> *Language has its basis in the effort to conceptualize and equalize the unequal, thus by-passing the essence and diversity of a varied, variable richness.*[20]
>
> *To hold that we and the world are but linguistic creations is just another way of saying how pervasive and controlling is symbolic culture.*
>
> *The word refuses the unifying, sensible rule of the sentence. It explodes the pre-established structure of meaning, and becoming an 'absolute object' itself, designates an intolerable, self-defeating universe — a discontinuum.*

[20] Zerzan 'Running on Emptiness'. *op cit.*

> *This subversion of the linguistic structure implies a subversion of the experience of nature.*[21]
>
> *Logical and linguistic analysis demonstrate that the old metaphysical problems are illusory problems, the quest for the 'meaning' of things can be reformulated as the quest for the meaning of words.*

If Zerzan's critique of art is self-refuting, similar objections apply to his remarks about language. Marcuse understands the way in which language is drawn into it all, the way in which it is subordinated to the 'logic of domination'. Yet, apart from this there is something else, language, which has not yet been subverted, which points towards objective experience. Zerzan, submerged as he is in Postmodernism and cynicism, has rather given up on all that. All there is is language, which can never accurately represent experience. The very act of symbolization itself is implicitly flawed. Language, even Zerzan's language about the booming wind and the antelope, can never tell us the truth.

## Veil of Symbols

> Writing about Husserl*: "The ideational veil of mathematical science is thus a veil of symbols which represents and at the same time masks the world of practice.*[22]
>
> *Out of a sense of being trapped and limited by symbols comes the thesis that the extent to which thought and emotion are tied to symbolism is the measure by which absence fills the inner world and destroys the outer world.*[23]
>
> *It is past time to see such pronouncements as ideology, serving to shore up the elemental falsification underneath a virtually all-encompassing false consciousness.*

The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl is a common point of departure for both Marcuse and Zerzan, with regard to symbol. The real clue to understanding the Zerzanian error is in the words 'absence fills the inner world'. Absence, and emptiness denote the *lack* of something, not a fullness. How can we be 'trapped and limited' by symbols? — We are trapped and limited by the poverty of our own imaginations, yes; by the external political, economic and social circumstances of our lives, yes. But to blame symbols for this is much the same type of thinking as the thief claiming the brick made him break the jeweller's window. Consider what is inside the mind of someone who can, with a straight face, think that 'we and the world are but linguistic creations'. This

[21] First quote: Marcuse ODM, p 66, second ODM, p 68
[22] Marcuse, ODM, p 133
[23] First quote Zerzan 'Running on Emptiness', GA 45–46, second quote *Future Primitive*, p 24.

is what Primitivism is all about — it is just verbal wallpaper. You can forget about listening to the booming rhythms of the wind, the earth and each others' heartbeats. That was just poetry. Go back to your tower blocks and your Monday morning traffic jams, you Morlocks! It is only 'linguistic creations', that's all.

## The Fifth Bulkhead

The Primitivist poet is rather like one of those Postmodernists who found they were on the Titanic. When the ship hit the iceberg, they hastily assembled in the lounge to retype the specifications, and redraw the plans on their lap top computers; so that the fifth bulkhead went all the way up to the top of the hull, stopping the water from filling the rest of the ship. "Because reality conforms to the written word and painted representation, the ship was saved." ('Parable of the Fifth Bulkhead' *ALB* 23, December 1998, p5)

## The Eternal Return

> *The ancient idea of a state where being attains fulfilment, where the tension between 'is' and 'ought' is resolved in the cycle of an eternal return, partakes of the metaphysics of domination. But it also pertains to the metaphysics of liberation — to the reconciliation of Logos and Eros.*[24]
>
> *We have taken a monstrously wrong turn with symbolic culture and division of labour, from a place of enchantment understanding and wholeness to the absence we find at the heart of progress.*[25]

We keep coming back to this eternal return; again and again and again. Nietzsche took it from Schopenhauer, Schopenhauer took it from the East. Heidegger took it from Nietzsche. According to his sister, Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche, the notion of the Will To Power came to him while watching a cavalry charge during the 1871 Franco-Prussian War. The source is considered unreliable, but a cavalry charge is perhaps not unlike the sight of a running herd of buffalo. Zerzan's writing, almost everywhere (whether unconsciously or by design I do not know) embodies Nietzsche's slave morality; this idea of overpowering the strong through weakness, undermining him by destroying his virtues, as with the Roman slaves bringing down the Empire with Christianity. Only with Zerzan, the slaves are the primitives, the strong is technology. It is a measure of their differing worth as thinkers that Marcuse knows that Logos and Eros can be reconciled, but with Zerzan, Eros can only be given poison to drink.[26]

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[24] Marcuse, ODM, p 136

[25] Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p45

[26] Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, section 168, Hollingdale tr, Penguin, 1973, p 87

# Unabomber

> *Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.*
>
> Karl Marx, *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach,* March 1845

'FC', or the Unabomber, was perhaps one of the very few sincere Primitivists. The Unabomber at least lived out his ideal, rejecting modern technology, and tried to bring about a wider appreciation of the mess we are all in, and suggest a way out. The Unabomber may have been an egotist and a killer, but he was not a hypocrite. On the other hand, the figure of the Unabomber has become somewhat of an Icon to the Poor Bloody Primitivist Infantry, a silken banner to hold aloft as they sally forth on their crusades. The symbol of the Unabomber has become a counter, valued somewhat between a Bishop and a Rook, to be moved at will around the Primitivist political chess board. Then again, to non-Primitivists, the Unabomber is a figure personifying evil itself.

# The Road to Good Intentions Leads to the Dustbin of History

The Unabomber was one of the sincere Primitivists, but sincerity is not enough however, and, as any child could tell you, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. Here, it is necessary to speak plainly. I make no criticism of the use of revolutionary violence *per se*, However, I believe that postal devices are morally wrong. The tactic of using mail bombs must be repudiated. So, on to the Unabomber manifesto itself, of all the Primitivist texts on display in this Museum of Dead Faiths, this is the one most known about, most circulated, perhaps even the most read.

> (*Manifesto*, s 96) *The mass media are mostly under the control of large organizations that are integrated into the system. Anyone who has a little money can have something printed, or can distribute it on the internet or in some such way, but what he has to say will be swamped by the vast volume of material put out by the media, hence it will have no practical effect. To make an impression on society with words is therefore almost impossible for most individuals and small groups ... In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people.*

It is necessary to change the world, but this involves creating a social and political movement with the clout to do this. Yet, the Unabomber Manifesto remains their one best attempt to put their ideas over. In itself, a manifesto is no substitute for a

movement. What 'FC' says about ownership, Spectacularization and the mass media is true, but it is not about publishing, readership or who can shout the loudest, but about changing things, *really changing things* — creating, building, sustaining the movement.

One of FC's most important ideas is that modern technology is a unified system: (s 121) *A further reason why industrial society cannot be reformed in favour of freedom is that modern technology is a unified system in which all parts are dependent on one another. You can't get rid of the 'bad' parts of technology and retain only the 'good' parts. Take modern medicine, for example. Progress in medical science depends on progress in chemistry, physics, biology, computer science and other fields. Advanced medical treatments require expensive, high tech equipment that can be made available only by a technologically progressive, economically rich society. Clearly you can't have much progress in medicine without the whole technological system and everything that goes with it.*

For FC, progress can only move in one direction, and with that, freedom has to retreat: (s 129) *Another reason why technology is such a powerful social force it that, within the context of a given society, technological progress marches in only one direction, it can never be reversed. Once a technological innovation has been introduced, people usually become dependent on it, unless it is replaced by some still more advanced innovation. Not only do people become dependent as individuals on a new item of technology, but even more, the system as a whole becomes dependent on it. (Imagine what would happen to the system today if computers, for example, were eliminated.) Thus the system can only move in one direction, toward greater technologization. Technology repeatedly forces freedom to take a step back — short of the overthrow of the whole technological system.*

For these reasons, civilization cannot be reformed: (s 93) *We are going to argue that industrial-technological society cannot be reformed in such a way as to prevent it from progressively narrowing the sphere of human freedom.*

Only a leap outside the framework can fix it. For most Primitivists, unable, unwilling or lacking the courage to put their hands to the wheel, this transcendence requires a leap of faith into mysticism. The Unabomber, on the other hand, wishes for political action. It is within the dimension of failed radical political action that FC is to be placed, as the disillusionment in his remarks against Leftism shows.

## Despair

Much of the manifesto resembles Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*[27] including, most importantly, the despair. For Ellul, Technique encompasses the totality, just as with the Unabomber, the different sciences and approaches necessarily link together, we cannot separate the good from the bad.[28] (Compare this with the Man-

[27] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (France 1954) tr John Wilkinson, Vintage, USA, 1964. I intend to write about Ellul at length in a future issue of *Green Anarchist* magazine.

[28] Ellul, *Technological Society*, page 111.

ifesto, ss 121–124.) "Technique cannot be otherwise that totalitarian". Ellul writes of man "being ringed about with a band of steel." We are trapped like a fly in a bottle.[29]

> (s 180) *The technophiles are taking us all on an utterly reckless ride into the unknown. Many people understand something of what technological progress is doing to us yet take a passive attitude towards it because they think it is inevitable. But we (FC) don't think it is inevitable. We think it can be stopped, and we will here give some indications of how to go about stopping it.*

**I make no criticism of the use of revolutionary violence *per se*. However, I believe that postal devices are morally wrong. The tactic of using mail bombs must be repudiated.**

Sometimes, Ellul's technique is like a force, sometimes it is like Darwinian evolution, but applied to machines, human culture and society. It has something of Nietzsche's Will To Power, Henri Bergson's *elan vital,* and Freud's Thanatos about it, but it is impersonal and machine-like too, anti-human. FC's technological, industrial civilization similarly thwarts and disrupts the power process, restricts and negates freedom:

> (s 140) *We hope we have convinced the reader that the system cannot be reformed in such a way as to reconcile freedom with technology. The only way out is to dispense with the industrial technological system altogether. This implies revolution, not necessarily an armed uprising, but certainly a radical and fundamental change in the nature of society.*

In both writers, technology is a network, spreading outwards and assimilating everything before it. Welcome to the Borg Collective. Ellul, on the one hand, as a determinist, does not think that anything much can be done against this. FC, on the other hand calls for revolution. A two-pronged ideological strategy is called for, pushing the notion of wild nature; with one strand aimed at the intelligentsia, with a rational, factual approach (s 187) and a second populist prong aimed at the wider public, pitched at a more emotional level, but not intemperate, patronising, or gimmicky. The aim should be to heighten tension between the mass and the leaders, and to replace the ideology of technology after the coming collapse.

## Gloomy Despair

Despair is what drove the Unabomber into his bombing campaign — despair at the destruction of nature, on the one hand, and despair at the lack of an effective movement to counteract this. FC's intemperate material against Leftists illustrates the point. Ellul, and others in the same vein stress the inevitability of the onward

[29] Ellul, *Technological Society*, p 418

march of the Forces of Mordor, and so have contributed to that atmosphere of despair. A visible, active, and effective protest movement, on the other hand, would prevent that despair. Resistance is not futile, but necessary, a duty enjoined on all beings who aspire to the condition of being sentient, and moral.

# John Moore

As a small fish swimming in a very small pool, John Moore is the leading UK Primitivist. In *Anarchy and Ecstasy* (1988) *Lovebite* (1991) and *Book of Levelling* (1995) he has taken the New Age spiritual cast of Primitivism about as far as it can go. More openly than Zerzan, Moore is clearly part of, and displays his Postmodernism, and is unhappy with the 'anarcho-primitivism' label, perhaps wishing to relaunch the current as 'anarcho-futurism'.

## Primitivist Spirituality

> "Religious issues constitute a vacuum at the centre of anarchism which limits its appeal and cogency."
>
> Moore quoting Bakunin, *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, Aporia, 1989, p10.
>
> "And the discourses and practices of art, it seems to me, have potential in terms of developing such [anarchist] epistemologies, and far more possibilities for forwarding the anarchist struggle than political discourses."
>
> Moore in his interview with John Filiss at www.primitivism.com

Some of John Moore's religious thought has already been shown in the section on 'Primitivist Spirituality' above. Similarly, Moore is sympathetic to art; both of these themes are anathema to Zerzan. For Zerzan, religion is implicated in hierarchical society, and the sacred was used to justify oppression. Rituals were an upper-palaeolithic safety valve, all about the management of loss.[30] The Shamens imposed agriculture and the subjugation of women.[31] "thanks to magic, man takes the offensive against the objective world." Similarly with art, Zerzan believes that we would have no need of art, but for the fact that we are alienated. Art is about controlling loss.[32]

## Defining Primitivism

> Moore's definition of Primitivism: "a radical current that critiques the totality of civilization from an anarchist perspective, and seeks to initiate a comprehensive transformation of human life."

[30] Zerzan, 'Running on Emptiness', *GA* 45/46, Spring 1997, p 24.
[31] Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p 38.
[32] Zerzan, 'The Case Against Art'

*The Primitivist Primer* (1996)

Again asserting Primitivism as a *total* critique: "Ideologies such as Marxism, classical anarchism and feminism oppose *aspects* of civilization, only anarcho-primitivism opposes civilization, the context within which the various forms of oppression proliferate and become pervasive." (*Primer*)

On the 'now you see it, now you don't' problem: "The aim is *not* to replicate or return to the primitive, merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy." (*Primer*)

On the approaching collapse of civilization and our need to know origins: "Locating origins is a way of identifying what can be safely salvaged from the wreck of civilization, and what is essential to eradicate if power relations are not to recommence after civilization's collapse." (*Primitivist Primer*, 1996.)

Moore is so tantalizingly close to being the strongest Primitivist writer of all, but somehow contrives to fall short. The reason for this relates to his Postmodernism. How can what he believes become reality when there is no reality? He writes of direct action, communities of resistance, but because of the Postmodern element, one is left doubting that he really wants to *physically* change it at all. Now you see it, now you don't. In what sense does he believe in it? Is it merely a posture? Consider the status of the 'Primitivist Primer', perhaps the clearest definition of Primitivism and for that reason the most attacked[33] Is the *Primer* a programme for real political action or the setting out of abstract and irrelevant doctrines, a pseudo-programme with no practical consequences? In this regard, compare the 'Primer' with the 'Unabomber Manifesto'.

Another example of his posturing is his piece quoting the Anarcho-Futurists:

> "Raising the black flag of rebellion, we summon all living men who have not been dehumanised, who have not been benumbed by the poisonous breath of Civilization! All to the streets! Forward! Destroy! Kill!
>
> *Anarcho Futurist Manifesto* in GA 40/41 p 19

## Surrender To The Land

> On wilderness: "a state inhabited by willful, uncontrollable natural energies. In such states, humans surrendered their individuality, renounced personal volition to the will of the land, and merged individuated desire within the expansive needs of the wild."
>
> 'Bewilderness' p 21

> "The central objective of the mysteries assumes three interrelated aspects: the arousal, shaping and projection of energy; possession by the wilderness

[33] David Watson, 'Swamp Fever', in *Fifth Estate*, discussed in section 6.

> of chthonic energies; and liberation of the involuntary through the gateway of the voluntary."
>
> Moore, *Anarchy & Ecstasy*, Aporia, 1987, p 28

In some respects this surrender represents nothing more harmless (ah yes but *is* it harmless?) than absorption in Freud's 'oceanic feeling' or Nirvana, but hostile critics may interpret it as some sort of nod towards blood and soil mysticism. The use of the word 'chthonic' is unfortunate here, reminiscent of 'autochthonic' as used by Heidegger in an anti-semitic context.[34] Who dwells in or beneath the earth and who were the original inhabitants of a physical place, takes us back towards that sort of thinking. However, I believe that Moore does not intend these connotations. Similar to this too is Paul Rogers' present rubric: "All life derives from the land. Civilization alienates us from the Earth, using nationhood and property law. We must take back the land and live self-sufficiently, re-establishing our relationship with the Earth."[35] Some of this type of thinking is a carry-over from the days of Richard Hunt as editor of *Green Anarchist*, and so not directly related to Primitivism as such. From *GA* 26, Spring 1991, at around the time of the start of Rogers' rise as editor, and the decline of Hunt in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, the rubric talked of a 'Sustainable land economy'. The mystical overtones were absent. In the immediate context, this was essentially a throwback to late Victorian 'Back to the Land!' thinking, and refers to land in a subsistence context; we grow food and so are dependent on it. However, this can also drift off towards a Deep Ecology mysticism, as it has done with Rogers (note the capitalization of 'Earth').

## Blood and Soil?

In a US context this thinking links with native American Indian tribal religions, or Kaczynski's Grandfather Rabbit, and is seen in a completely benign way. Yet here, people distrust this kind of mysticism, and with good reason. In a European setting, we find this land mysticism to be mixed, but with some extremely negative connotations; brooding Teutonic forests, (Nazi), lakes and mountains, (Wordsworth and Ruskin) Druidic Sacred Groves (human sacrifice?), Glastonbury, King Arthur and Camelot, (pagan or nationalist?) Anglo-Saxon ploughmen (could be either William Morris rusticism or a BNP type nationalist image), and many other such connections. In the face of these, land mysticism (even of the allegedly anodyne sort practiced by Primitivists) is a minefield, and best avoided.

[34] See Heidegger's letter of October 20th 1929 to Victor Schworer: "There is a pressing need for us to remember that we are faced with the choice of either bringing genuine autochthonous forces and educators into our German spiritual life, or finally abandoning it to the growing Judaization in the wider and narrower sense." Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Beyond Good and Evil*, tr Osers, Harvard U Press, 1998, p 255.

[35] Fairly typical Rogers' rubric, from leaflet given out with *EF! Action Update*, issue 80 December 2001.

## Form or Content?

Primitivists could counter the accusation by claiming that doctrines of Blood and Soil mysticism are claims to link a *particular* people (a race) to a particular place, whereas Primitivism is generalised, a call to *all* people regardless of ethnic background to submerge their identities with the wilderness. The wilderness is generic, not a specific place. The response denies there is a common form to the call to the land, that Primitivism and Blood and Soil mysticism are different in character. This may be a true or it may be a false claim. What is needed is more evidence. If they are the same in form, but differ only in content or style, the accusation stands.

## The Four Hypotheses of the Apocalypse

There are four basic explanations here for why Primitivists might use land mysticism concepts: (i) The US explanation: Their work is subordinated to the US context and cares nothing for the European, right wing resonance of some of these concepts. (ii) The sentimental nostalgia hypothesis: They are aware of the Nazi use of blood and soil concepts but in an honest but perhaps misguided way, wish to reclaim them for the left. (iii) The sheer bloody ignorance explanation: They are completely unaware of their resonance. (iv) The Homean hypothesis: Their work may be subordinated to Nazism or some form of 'softer' eg Third Positionist right wing mysticism, and their trade is simply repackaging, trying to camouflage this. (For fuller treatment of this topic see section 6)

I tend to believe that here, the first and third option apply, the US context and ignorance. Because of the general character of Primitivist politics otherwise, I find the second and last alternatives implausible.

## Moore's Postmodernism

> "Foregrounding the constructed nature of the text exposes the artificial nature of all ideological representation, and liberates those suppressed energies delimited by Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva."
>
> John Moore's reply to Debye Highmountain, *Fifth Estate*, Winter 1992, p 27

Moore's Postmodernism has already been discussed above, and is clear from his defence of 'Lovebite' in *Fifth Estate*, but is also seen via the orthodoxy of postmodern linguistic relativism in his interview with John Filiss: "It is a truism that different languages produce different realities." Moore remains a Postmodernist. When we understand that, we understand Moore.

## Disatisfaction

> "I don't like the term 'primitivist' as in 'anarcho-primitivist'. Historically it is a term that has been attached to those anti-civilization resisters who have engaged in a reappraisal of the primitive as part of a search for radical alternatives to the global megamachine. But the term isn't a useful one because it carries with it an accumulated baggage of associations that seem impossible to slough off. Despite essays like my *Comin' Home: Defining Anarcho-Primitivism* (*GA* 38, pp7-8) which explode notions that Primitivism entails atavism and regression, I constantly encounter accusations of retrogression and find myself asserting almost *ad infinitum* that primitivism does *not* mean going back to nature or back to the caves."
>
> Commentary on the 'Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto', *GA* 40–41.

One aspect of his Postmodernism, and the reason why he falls short, is that Moore's 'commitment' is expressed through his vacillation. US Primitivists deny that he *is* a Primitivist. *Fifth Estate* because Moore is too close to their model, therefore a rival, but also as a Limey Upstart whose nose must therefore be tweaked; and the Zerzanians out of sectarian hatred, because Moore is not a Zerzanian. As early as GA 40/41, in 1996, John Moore expressed disatisfaction with the term 'Primitivism' and more recently returned to this theme in his Filiss interview. It remains to be seen whether this *Kehre* (turn) is permanent, or mere window dressing.

> "In the Primer I said that Primitivism is merely a convenient label. But for me anyway, it has lost its convenience."
>
> Moore Interview with John Filiss, at www.primitivism.com

# 5. Ten Principal Themes or Features of Primitivism

Below, I sketch out ten key themes / features of Primitivism, analyze these, and discuss some of the objections. It is necessary to note that not all Primitivists will hold to all ten themes, but these are the core of Primitivism.

## 1. The rejection of civilization, industrialization and progress

This is primitivism's primary identifying feature, but this has many problems. Civilization is seen as bad, intrinsically evil, but this is one sided. Washing machines, hospitals, anaesthetics, sewerage, clean water supplies — all of these are rejected as irredeemably bad. Can we legitimately make the jump from *some* effects of technology are bad, to *all* technology is to be rejected? It is here that the distinction between Hardcore and Softcore Primitivism is instructive. Softcore Primitivists like Robert Heinberg[1] are critical of Civilization; for its catastrophic environmental impact, for the domestication of people, for oppression, slavery, theft, warfare, for its Priests and Kings. Heinberg does not advocate an absolute rejection of modern life, but wishes to keep some aspects. Hardcore Primitivists, by contrast, as represented in the *Unabomber Manifesto*,[2] says "It would be better to dump the whole stinking system, and take the consequences." (Section 179) Technology, as a total network, must go. 'Until the industrial system has been thoroughly wrecked, the destruction of that system must be the revolutionaries' *only* goal.' (s 200)

### The system as an Entity

For the Unabomber, Industrialization has been a complete disaster, destroying nature and enslaving people, reducing us to cogs. In Deep Ecology, nature has implicit value in its own right, requiring humanity to keep clear and not to interfere with it. Industrial-technological civilization is here seen as a thoroughly bad, like a conscious

[1] Robert Heinberg, GA 49/50 Autumn 1997, 'Was Civilization A Mistake?'

[2] The *Unabomber Manifesto*, first published September 19th 1995. GA39, Autumn 1995.

entity, making demands, having interests, having needs which it must fulfill eg; 'The system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs. Instead, it is human behaviour that has to be modified to fit the needs of the system.' (s 119) or 'But it is NOT in the interest of the system to preserve freedom or small group autonomy. On the contrary, it is in the interest of the system to bring human behaviour under control to the greatest possible extent.' (s 139)

## Implicit Totalitarianism

Under this view, technology necessarily leads to authoritarianism. If we wish to oppose authoritarianism, we must rid ourselves of civilization. Rules and regulations are needed to eg run a factory, and with greater complexity comes more control. 'Freedom and technological progress are incompatible.' (ss 113 ff), the more complex the system, the less personal autonomy. Instead, we are saddled with managerialism, control through advertising, propaganda, training, and psychological manipulation. People become like caged animals. Drugs and genetic engineering offer new ways of controlling, but people still rebel or suffer bad psychological effects from this sense of purposelessness. (s 64)

## Progress

Because you cannot disinvent the wheel, progress only moves in one direction. 'Once a technical innovation has been introduced, people usually become dependent on it.' (s 129) The *Manifesto* uses the analogy of a strong man (technology) stealing land off a weaker man (freedom), demanding more and more off him. Should the strong man ever fall sick, the weaker will be forced to kill him, lest the stronger recover and take all the land (s 135) Is it inevitable though, that technology necessarily entails slavery? The *Manifesto* uses the example of medicines, which require chemistry, biology, manufacturing machinery, transport (s 121). In this, technology, capitalism and the state are connected, but it might be possible to break away from this, to separate them. On the one hand the internet has enabled Microsoft and Bill Gates to make a lot of money, but on the other hand information and communications flow more readily between protest movements. Could global capitalism be engineering its own demise?[3]

[3] If the law of opposite effect applies to the revolutionaries, why does it not apply to the state also?

This theme is found in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, particularly in *Ideas, I,* in his discussion of the ego, and the absolute nature of the subject. Husserl, as an underlying objective, seeks after some kind of permanence, validity like the rock or the stone. Part of the solution to the problem of the contingency and ephemeral nature of human life is to seek to merge the mind with the physical. See also *Cartesian Meditations* V. This quest lies behind the Primitivist diagnosis too.

### All or Nothing?

The *Manifesto*, tells us it is easier to get rid of it all in one fell swoop than to reform it piecemeal. 'The only way out is to dispense with the industrial-technological system altogether.' (s 140) In the *Manifesto,* the conflict is a three cornered battle between industrial civilization, the true revolutionaries, and the bourgeois leftists. Is technology so completely enmeshed, and as totally bad as FC's *Manifesto* portrays? Looking at the photographs, it appears that even the planks of the Unabomber's shed have been cut and shaped using timber mill circular saws and wood-planers, which implies sharpening tools, steel, motive power. This points towards a possible answer. In rejecting technology / civilization, three distinct types of problem are merged. First; we have the unintentional bad effects of technology — pollution, global warming, the ozone hole. Second; we have the technologies of oppression — alienation, insignificance, which are a deliberately chosen use of manufacturing, or of the mass media, the shaping of the urban environment etc etc, for evil purposes. Third, is the Pandora's Box problem — Chernobyl, genetics, ebola plague weapons unleashed unintentionally, a particle physics meltdown, setting fire to the atmosphere, endocrine disruptors in water supplies. There are specific answers to all three of these types of problem, although the solutions may require more political action than society as a whole is prepared to take. Merely by linking the three types of problem together in our thinking, it does not follow from this that *all* technology is implicitly evil. This blanket rejection of it all is a counsel of despair, a revolutionary posture which brings little or no results, and is ultimately disempowering, because few if any people are prepared to go so far. What is needed is a parallel processing approach — a series of political campaigns to attack each of these specific problems in particular ways. We need to be a whole lot more intelligent, lateral-thinking and inventive in our thinking here.

## 2. Anthropology, the 'Primitive Affluence' thesis

The 'primitive affluence' thesis depends on anthropological observations of primitive tribes. It was found that between 3 and 5 hours gathering, brought sufficient food for all. When compared with hectic modern activity and pointless 'busy-ness', the primitive life-way is declared superior. This call to go back to the stone age is the corollary of the Deep Ecology thesis that nature is of absolute intrinsic value, and that humanity should not interfere with it. Hunter-gatherers are the closest human beings could come to that position of absolute non-interference. Such a call implies the total obliteration of human culture, however.

### Stone Age Economics

Around the same time as Marcuse published *One Dimensional Man*, and arising out of similar discontents with Western civilization, anthropologists were making a re-

assessment of primitive peoples and cultures. In 1962, Claude Levi-Strauss published 'The Savage Mind' and in 1963 John Vernon Taylor published 'The Primal Vision'. Through the 1960s, Marshall Sahlins conducted the research eventually published as 'Stone Age Economics' (1972)[4] and Richard Borshay Lee 'Man the Hunter'[5] Sahlins collected together studies of primitive peoples, finding that contrary to received anthropological wisdom, the bushmen did not live in scarcity, but could find enough to eat for around 3 to 4 hours work per day. As far back as 1841, Australian explorers like Sir George Grey were contradicting established opinion, declaring 'I can only say that I have always found the greatest abundance in their huts.' Alexander Henry found a similar plenty back in 1763–4 with the Chippewa tribe in Northern Michigan. A 1948 US-Australian expedition to Fish Creek, Arnhem Land, and Hemple Bay, Groote Eylandt (Northern Territory, Australia) found average work times of 3 hours 44 mins (women) and 3 h 50 m (men) at Fish Creek, 5 h 9 m (women) and 5 h 7 min (men) at Hemple Bay, for a diet or 2130 calories and 2160 calories respectively. In July / Aug 1964, the Dobe section of the !Kung bushmen in Botswana averaged 2 hrs 9 mins per day. Food was plentiful, including the mangetti nut, 'so abundant that millions of the nuts rotted on the ground each year for want of picking'[6] James Woodburn studied the Hadza, in northern Tanzania, who worked for just 2 hrs / day, and refused to take up agriculture — the Neolithic Revolution. 'Why should we plant, when there are so many mongomongo nuts in the world?[7]

## Three Primal Streams

As used by the Primitivists, this psychological wilderness is irrigated by three streams of inspiration. The first is psychoanalysis. Freud's 'Totem and Taboo' (1912–13) and Civilization and Its Discontents' (1930) mentioned above. Perhaps lesser considered here is C G Jung, who, influenced by Friedrich Creuzer, between 1905–13 taught on the psychology of primitives in the University of Zurich.[8] Jung undertook an expedition to Kenya and Uganda in the Autumn of 1925, to escape from 'Europe the mother of all demons' and study the Kakamegas and Elgonyi peoples. Jung wrote about this theme in his 'Archaic Man' (1931)[9] Jung's disciple, Laurens Van Der Post,[10] wrote 'The Lost World of the Kalahari' (1958), a source cited by John Zerzan.[11] The second

[4] Marshall Sahlins *Stone Age Economics*, USA 1972, Tavistock 1974.

[5] Richard Borshay Lee, and Irven De Vore (eds) *Man the Hunter*, Aldine Press, Chicago, 1968.

[6] Richard Borshay Lee, and Irven De Vore (eds) *Man the Hunter*, Aldine Press, Chicago, 1968.

[7] Sahlins, *The Original Affluent Society*, p 21.

[8] Lee p 33, quoted by Sahlins p 27.

[9] C G Jung, *Memories Dreams Reflections,* tr publ. Routledge, London, 1963, p 138 ff. The essay, 'Archaic Man' (1931) is in *Civilization in Transition*, Collected Works Vol 10, RKP London, 1964 and also in *Modern Man in Search of A Soul*, London and New York, 1933.

[10] Laurens Van Der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari,* Morrow, N Y, author of *Jung, The Story of Our Time*, Hogarth Press, London 1976.

[11] Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p 33.

stream of inspiration here is the Structural Anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss[12] who throughout his *oeuvre* argued for the intellectual unity of mankind, and overturning western racist presuppositions, showed that primitive people are capable of abstract thinking.[13] This theme is reflected in the work of John Zerzan, for example, who argues that human intelligence was present from the earliest, citing the example of the Acheulian hand axe.[14] The third stream is the critique of capitalist materialism made by the Frankfurt School. Another possible influence is Karl Polanyi,[15] who criticised the market-industrial system as obsolete. The market system institutes the perception of scarcity in the middle of plenty, sponsors artificial needs. These desires are perpetually thwarted (if you buy a Plymouth car you cannot also have a Ford) Everything is kept close by, but tantalisingly just out of reach.

## Against the Hobbesian Myth

The anthropological work of Sahlins and Lee was later taken up by the Primitivists.[16] for example Bob Black and John Zerzan. The starting point here was the 'Nightmare' of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)[17], with the view of primitive life as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Sahlins' work is concerned to refute the ethnocentricity of earlier studies which had racist and colonialist assumptions. Even Sir George Grey found his contemporaries 'an inquest into the corpse of one society presided over by members of another'[18] Zerzan cites the work of Sahlins and Lee[19] as does Black[20] Rather than the negative 'Hobbesian' conditions assumed, primitive life was characterised by abundance, sufficiency, not scarcity. Primitive peoples were not poor, they did not live in poverty (a western assumption / description) but were free. They had no ambition or avarice. Primitives never developed acquisitiveness, a Neolithic trait. Following thinkers like Adorno, Lukacs, Horkheimer and Marcuse; that material affluence does not necessarily bring greater happiness — it is modern people who are poor, subject to scarcity, alienated, working too hard, consuming too much — but under Primitivism, this is unnecessary. For Zerzan the 'Neolithic Revolution' represents a

[12] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques, The Raw and the Cooked*, etc. but see also: Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* Paris, 1966

[13] Levi-Strauss *The Savage Mind,* London, Chicago, 1966.

[14] Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p 22.

[15] Karl (Paul) Polanyi (1886–1964, Hungarian politician, Professor of Economics, Columbia University 1947–53, argued that the market economy was so socially divisive that it had no long term future; see *The Great Transformation*, Rinehart, N Y 1944 and *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies*, ed George Dalton, Doubleday, USA, 1968.

[16] It should also be noted that this work was also cited in Richard Hunt's pamphlet *The Natural Society.* 1978.

[17] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviatha*n, chapter 13, 1651.

[18] Sahlins, p 8

[19] John Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, Autonomedia, USA, 1994, pp15-46.

[20] Bob Black "Primitive Affluence, a Postscript to Sahlins', GA39, Autumn 1995, p 8.

terrible disaster in human history. Authenticity was lost, people, animals and plants became domesticated. Zerzan quotes Shelley 'We look before and after, and sigh for what is not'[21] Zerzan tells us Laurens Van Der Post reports how the San have 'a superior laugh' The non-violent, non hierarchical San and !Kung are contrasted with Bantu tribes like the Saga. It is only later that we get meat eating, the subjugation of women, cannibalism, property, symbolization, time.

## 'Profoundest night of non-being'

Primitivism consistently evades the issue of whether we could really want this return to the Stone Age. (the sincerity versus posturing issue) Once the novelty of it wore off, and the techniques of evading all the lions, insects, crocodiles, bears or hyenas were mastered, western people would find this a living death. The stasis and silence of that world would drive most of us mad. The eternal sameness of the paleolithic, long periods of sleep and inactivity after the mere 3–5 hours of hunting would become unbearably tedious. This eternal dream-like state was how human beings lived for millennia, but during that period they did not develop. It would be an eternal night, never a becoming. During his 1925 Kenyan tour, Jung tells of his impression of *deja vu* at the sight of an Athai Plains African with a spear, still and statuesque, standing by a cactus, watching the dawn come up. This is how it must have been for aeons, eternally dawn, eternally night. Jung declares that if human consciousness had not created the objective world, forever this 'would have gone on in the profoundest night of non-being, down to its unknown end.'[22] Primitivism is an invitation to return to that profound night of non-being, a return to sleep, to deep oblivion.

## Primitive Confusion

Sahlins rightly criticises anthropologists who imported their own ideological presuppositions into their research and analysis. Robert J Braidwood for example: 'a man who spends his whole life following animals just to kill them to eat, or moving from one berry patch to another, is really living just like an animal himself.'[23] The problem is that under Primitivism, we also get an ideological view. The negatives are played down. The bushmen could count the moons of Jupiter with the naked eye, or hear a small aeroplane 60 miles away. The sexes were equal, women were not dependent on the men, meat eating was a late innovation. We do not find the negatives — primitives did not have property because they had to carry everything they had in a small skin bag. These criticisms are voiced by Marielle and and Alain C in their pamphlet 'John

[21] Zerzan *Future Primitive*, p 31.

[22] Jung, *Memories, Dreams Reflections*, p 283.

[23] Robert J Braidwood, *The Near East and the Foundations for Civilization*, Eugene USA, 1952 p 122, quoted in Sahlins op cit, p 5.

Zerzan and the Primitive Confusion'.[24] who focus on Zerzan's use of the anthropological material. Zerzan is seen to be projecting back his own ideology on to palaeolithic culture, with his claims about the non-sexual division of labour, and disputes over evidence of meat eating.[25] The pamphlet accuses Zerzan of 'proof by selective example' and later, of propaganda. Zerzan's habit of amassing an intimidatory 'wall of quotations' is an example of the 'terrorism of evidence'[26] but ultimately unconvincing. The evidence is being ripped out of its context.

## 3. Primitivist spirituality. Mythology, pan-psychism, and New Age beliefs

Buried within Primitivism is a religious underlay, especially a tendency towards pan-psychism, belief in a unified 'world-soul', that I am in the rock, the stone, the blade of grass, and they are in me. Monism — this belief in the essential unity of all things, has a long and distinguished pedigree and was expressed in neo-Platonism, Giordano Bruno, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) Pseudo-Dionysius, and Spinoza. It was put forwards by Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schleiermacher, (1768–1834) Ludwig Feuerbach, and Marx. Pan-psychism is found in Leibniz, and also in the philosophy of John McTaggart. A more proximate influence to Primitivism might be Edmund Husserl, who wrote of the 'crisis' in European thought.[27]

Such a trendy spirituality harmonises with New Age movements, but also takes in areas like Starhawk and North American tribal beliefs. In itself, quite aside from Primitivism *per se*, the interest in these types of spirituality is a response to the closed character of the western scientific cultural system. People feel alienated in the modern world, and so seek an out from it through religions. It is a kind of 'inner immigration' or escapism. In the North American context, part of the reason for the popularity of this type of spirituality is a reaction against the colonial history of America. Believers feel guilt at the foundations of their own society; the genocide against Native Americans — the typhoid infested blankets given to the Indians. This type of spirituality is a form of psychic compensation.

[24] Alain C and Marielle, *John Zerzan and the Primitive Confusion*, tr Chronos publications, London 2000.

[25] *Primitive Confusion*, p 3.

[26] *Primitive Confusion*, p 7.

[27] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr David Carr, Northwestern UP Evanston 1970. See also note 72.

## Taoism

John Moore, for example, in 'It's Not Working'[28] evokes Taoism. Quoting the Tao-Te-Ching, Moore declares:

> *This is a resolutely post civilization perspective. The Taoist utopia is marked by rejection of technology, writing and work, and a corresponding assertion of a small-scale, self-sufficient, culturally rooted, communalist lifeway, characterised by simplicity, abundance, tranquility and contentment.*

As ways of evading the demands of civilization, Moore goes on to cite examples of twisted trees which are not cut down, cripples evading military conscription:

> *As in contemporary anarchy and Chaos Theory, in Taoist thought harmony emerges spontaneously through the interaction of semi-autonomous elements, not through compulsion and the imposition of order ...*
>
> *Through* wu wei*, Taoist thinkers seek a way of acting on the world without acting in the world.*

This principle is seen in softness: *Nothing in the world is Softer or Weaker than water. But for attacking the hard and the strong, nothing is better. It has no equal. Softness overcomes what is hard. Weakness overcomes what is unyielding.*

## Feral Fault-Line

Primitivists may well disagree on the place this syncretistic spirituality should have within their ideology. Indeed, it could well be the fault line which eventually breaks the Primitivist facade to pieces. Feral Faun's pamphlet, *The Quest For the Spiritual*,[29] is one point where the fault-line is clearest. On the one hand, Feral Faun seeks an unmediated, ecstatic, experience of creativity, passion and freedom, but on the other hand his model for the activist / believer is individualistic, Stirnerite, Nietzschean, isolated. Social roles are to be completely rejected, as is morality, 'The cops in our heads'. The ecstatic is to be sought in the wilderness, in the lycanthropic. Combined with this is the rejection of organised religions. At base, orthodox religions have become the servant of civilization and oppression. Under Dualism, the spiritual has been banished to an idealized, unreal, abstract world, leaving only a dead, mechanistic material domain, a wilderness. Following Nietzsche *et al*, 'Nineteenth Century materialism made the mistake of killing god without reclaiming what god had stolen from human beings and from the world.' Materialism creates a world where people are domesticated, zombified, turned into cogs in a machine. The Adamites and Ranters of the Middle

[28] John Moore 'It's Not Working' *GA* 39, Autumn 1995, p 12.

[29] Feral Faun, *The Quest For The Spiritual*, pamphlet, published by GA, 1998.

Ages are looked up to as patterns for escape. In *Drifting Away From The Sacred* (p9) Feral Faun is unsure about New Age spirituality. Possibly, they represent a failure of collective nerve: 'Recent revivals of mysticism, paganism, and shamanism among certain radicals *may* be misguided attempts at reclaiming their lives, but they appear to me to be a retreat into a fantasy realm in the face of seemingly overwhelming social forces.'

## Grandfather Rabbit

As another expression of Primitivist spirituality, take for example the Kintz[30] interview of Ted Kaczynski:

> *While I was living in the woods I sort of invented some gods for myself. Not that I believed in these things intellectually, but they were ideas that sort of corresponded with some of the feelings I had. I think the first one I invented was Grandfather Rabbit. ... I invented a myth for myself that this was the Grandfather Rabbit, the grandfather who was responsible for the existence of all other rabbits. He was able to disappear, that is why you couldn't catch him and why you would never see him. Every time I shot a snowshoe rabbit, I would always say 'thank you Grandfather Rabbit'. After a while I acquired an urge to draw snowshoe rabbits, I sort of got involved with them to the extent that they would occupy a great deal of my thought. I actually did have a wooden object that, among other things, I carved a snowshoe rabbit in. ... There was another that I sometimes called the Will O' the Wisp or the Wings of the Morning. That's when you go out into the hills in the morning and you feel drawn to go on and on and on, then you are following the wisp. That was another god that I invented for myself.*

## Mumbo Jumbo?

One possible reaction could be to dismiss this whole area as mumbo-jumbo. Belief in this is not a live option. Newwidge after all, rhymes with sewage, they will tell you. New Age mysticism, primal religions and Taoism are comprehensible as religions, but we should not pretend that, as these beliefs are used in Primitivism, they constitute an effective body of political beliefs or are a radical, concrete programme for action towards change. Rather, they are used as just one element in the Postmodern collage, or as wallpaper. Part of their function is apologetic, to draw people in. Here, Primitivist spirituality is cynical, irreverent, exploitative.

[30] *GA*57/58 Autumn 1999, p 20. Caution is required here in interpreting this interview. The fact Kintz published this, is one of the reasons why Kaczynski broke with her. (see his letter dated 21st Feb 2001) It is not clear how far the views ascribed to 'Kaczynski' in the interview are those really held by him. Then again, is Kintz herself really a sincere Primitivist?

**"Recent revivals of mysticism, paganism, and shamanism among certain radicals *may* be misguided attempts at reclaiming their lives, but they appear to me to be a retreat into a fantasy realm in the face of seemingly overwhelming social forces." — Feral Faun**

## Primal Religions

In placing it, we see how Primitivist spirituality absorbs some features of these, but yet is still in relation to western culture, (eg Kaczynski only sort of half believed it) but at the same time seeks to defer back even further, to the primal religions. These are characterised as typically, holding to forms of pan-psychism, shamanism, myths about the cosmos, ancestor worship, beliefs about destiny, fate, the harmony of opposites, the appeasement of earth spirits ('Thank you, Grandfather Rabbit') and prohibitions on disturbing the interactive flow of the elements; the belief in a cosmic unity. C G Jung in Kenya, or Laurens Van Der Post in the Kalahari — we see how Primitivism's treatment of the anthropological material of Sahlins et al, represents an updating of Australian aborigines' myths about 'Dreamtime', a lost golden age of stories about origins and primal simplicity.

## Totem and Taboo

Holding to this type of spirituality is a double-edged sword. To some it will be attractive — a positive selling feature. To other, more rationalistic people, it could prove a big turn off. For if the ultimate 'truth' of Primitivism is something you learn spiritually, not through reason, then it is not a belief system which someone can be argued out of.[31] We all remember the sad case of one Martin Heidegger, 'the Little Magician from Messkirch' who expressed dislike for 'that whore reason' and hostility towards the western philosophical tradition, and who, after his Rectoral Address and subsequent ostracism abandoned philosophy altogether for the poetry of such as Holderlin, Rilke and Trakl. In *Green Anarchy* 5, (Spring 2001) the US magazine founded by Saxon Wood commented 'We're personally getting a little sick of primitivist rhetoric (especially in this town) and while we'll continue to make use of primitivism as a critical tool, we feel we need to move beyond it, as it is already in the process of becoming a religion to many people.' The quote above from the Kaczynski interview indicates the attitude of reverence.

## Nascent Cult

What is interesting about the Primitivist use of anthropology is that outwardly it is in essence an appeal to scientific prestige. (believe me because the research confirms

[31] The prototype here has to be the popular book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert M Pirsig, Morrow NY, USA 1974, Corgi London 1976.

it). Its status within Primitivist thought, however, is as scripture; the anthropological material is used as religious text. It is sacred, hence the opprobrium heaped on those who doubt the prophets Sahlins and Lee. As this thought system has hardened, Primitivism has developed other characteristics which mark it out as an incipient religious cult. The tenets of Primitivism are like its sacred beliefs; the prohibition on questioning, the imposition of the categories of orthodoxy and heresy, the anathematization of heretics — all these confirm its religious character. Impotent, unable to match or counter the power of the technological / industrial society, the Primitivist believer turns inwards to myths and dogmatism, of dreams about *mana*, the totem power of Primitivist religion overturning Leviathan in a spiritual but not a real, sense. The conflict is spiritualised.[32]

# 4. The critique of mass society and 'leftism'

One description of the sickness evokes prototypical modern concerns — 'loveless sex, increasing heroin use and a sense of despair masked by consumerism' — (John Zerzan in 'Culture'.)[33] Again, we return to the commodity. It is ironic (in the full Postmodern sense) that Primitivism draws on the work of leftists like Karl Marx, Weber, Lukacs, Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, the Situationists and others to mount this critique of the contemporary world, and yet Primitivists are so hostile to leftists.

## Unabomber

One reason why Primitivists must reject Leftism is that Leftists do not oppose technology, but rather seek to appropriate industry to their own, ultimately hierarchical and recidivist ends. The *Unabomber Manifesto* contains a long and vitriolic attack on 'Leftism', Here, Leftism is a collection of things; political correctness, self-hatred, masochism, political defeatism, the identification with the mass. The *Manifesto* identifies part of the problem as 'over socialization'; ultra-conformism and guilt at their own feelings of hatred. 'Leftists tend to hate anything that has an image of being strong, good and successful ... The reasons that leftists give for hating the West etc clearly do not correspond with their real motives.' (s 15) 'The leftist is anti-individualistic, pro-collectivist. He wants society to solve everyone's needs for them, take care of them.' (s 16) Towards the end of the *Manifesto* the Leftism theme is returned to. There should be no collaboration with Leftists 'A movement that exalts nature and opposes technology must take a resolutely anti-leftist stance and must avoid all collaboration with

[32] Here the Brian Morris / John Moore correspondence is instructive (*GA*54/55 onwards) where Morris accuses Moore of hostility to the Enlightenment project, and Moore says 'The question of the Enlightenment does not interest me in the least.' (*GA* 57/58 p 23, Autumn 1999) This attitude is indicative of the broader Primitivist malaise.

[33] John Zerzan 'Culture' see *GA*52, Summer 1998, p 9.

leftists' (s 214) From Robespierre onwards, Leftists have always double-crossed their fellow-travellers. Leftists are totalitarian and power hungry. (s 220)

## Bob Black

Bob Black's polemic against Murray Bookchin, *Anarchy After Leftism,*[34] is similarly hostile to Leftism. Up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, anarchists competed with Marxists on Leftist terms, and always lost. For practical purposes, Anarchists defined themselves within Leftism. Now, with the demise of 'the left that was' 'for the first time in history, they (ie anarchists) are the only revolutionary current.'[35] Black calls upon anarchism to define itself independently of Leftism, to address popular concerns, like not voting, technology, progress, workplace conflict, and to work to put salt in the system's self-inflicted wounds. 'The pre-condition for any substantial increase in anarchist influence is for anarchists to make explicit and emphatic their break with the left.'[36] Black sees this as a 'paradigm shift'. 'The old anarchism — the libertarian fringe of The Left That Was — is finished.'[37]

## Shibboleths

Some Primitivist criticism of Workerism accords with the more generalised discomfort and rejection of Leftism felt within the wider protest movement, often hardened by bitter experience. This criticism has a two-fold polarization effect — people who dislike Leftism may be drawn towards Primitivism; while hardline Leftists may be more inclined to attack Primitivism, because they see their potential recruits seeping away. 'the next generation's practitioners of anarchism are increasingly abandoning social anarchism for lifestyle anarchism.'[38] Among this broader criticism, there is a generalised rejection of the myth that the working class are the fountain of all virtue in the world, and disbelief that the workers will ever really rise up and throw off their shackles in a glorious proletarian revolution. This much is true, but is also accepted by the more forward and less dogmatic activists within the left itself. Part of the Primitivist motivation is a wish to distance itself from past Leftist failures. (eg the collapse of the revolution in 1968) Marxism, for example is linked with Communism, Soviet Russia, the Iron Curtain, the gulag, and this has a particular resonance in the Cold War and post Cold War US context. Parts of the class struggle anarchist movement are seen as linked with Marxism, and so are dead, ideologically bankrupt, dinosaurs. Part of the hostility to workerism (cf the pretentious terminology here in talk of 'ouvrierism') is an inverted snobbery, the mirror image of the Swiss finishing school educated class

[34] Bob Black, *Anarchy After Leftism* CAL Press, 1997. (=AAL)
[35] AAL, p 140
[36] AAL, p 142.
[37] AAL, p 145
[38] AAL, p 148

struggle anarchists, where Primitivists see people who falsely idolize the working class as beneath contempt.[39]

## Patronage and Pastiche

Influenced by Jacques Camatte, the Primitivist account of the left is as holders of a false hope, promoters of a defunct myth, as political gangsters, people without integrity, corrupt beneficiaries of patronage, as servants of the *status quo*, as dinosaurs; applies to some, perhaps many, but not to *all* leftists. It can go beyond the customary confines of rancid radical polemic into all out pastiche. Where it does, we have to ask ourselves, what is the point of this? Here, Primitivist hostility to Leftism is another way of keeping us divided, and weak. It comes back to that whole politics of bloody-mindedness theme.

## Rivalry

Partly, it is a politics of confrontation thing. As Primitivism is in ideological competition with Marxism, Socialism, Syndicalism (the old tired Left) these systems have to be criticised, declared bankrupt. Sometimes, the argument of the herd is deployed as in 'Primitivists now numerically exceed leftists'. ('the crowd is untruth' — Kierkegaard)

Primitivism defers to Leftist categories, and thinkers. Yet can citing the fact of its eclecticism be a valid objection? A parallel point to make here is the conceptual dependency of Primitivism, not just on leftism but also on Deep Ecology. It is also necessary to give some account of the Primitivist hostility to collectivism. Within Primitivism there is a certain misanthropist strand, for example, some of the Eugeniard pronouncements come fairly close to despair and nihilism:

*Unlike the classical anarchists, we don't have the privilege of minimal environmental awareness. If we make the claim that free humans can choose to live in harmony with nature, we'd better discover ten ecologically flourishing new planet earths to move on to, or else start to question our assumption that this single planet can sustain us at our present population, whether socialist, anarchist, capitalist or fascist.*

*While we in no way prescribe mass human genocide for the sake of ecological preservation, we recognize that civilized humanity itself is voluntarily (although maybe unintentionally) committing collective suicide through its own unsustainable behaviour. The bulk of humanity has already chosen its own fate, and we don't consider ourselves obligated to rescue it from the impact of its own decisions.*[40]

[39] Having met and worked with people on the left, and seen the ethical content of some of their ideas and activity, this Primitivist hostility seems to me to be particularly wrong (ie morally wrong). However, the Left needs to concentrate more on, and promote, the ethical dimension of its activity, too. In particular, it needs to repudiate and counter harmful Leftist activity.

[40] *Green Anarchy*, issue 6, editorial 'Green Anarchy and Classical Anarchism' Summer 2001, p2.

# 5. Zero Work

> *Also it is part of these tyrannical measures to keep the subjects poor, in order to pay the guards and soldiers, so that they will be occupied with earning their livelihood and will have neither leisure nor opportunity to engage in conspiratorial acts...*
>
> White Rose, leaflet 3, quoting Aristotle *Politics.*

## Fully Unemployed

Typical of Primitivist 'Zero Work' perspectives is 'Fully Unemployed' by Leigh Starcross.[41] Here, the work ethic is seen as an inevitable product of civilization, and contrasted with primitive life. It is here that we can see the Situationist influence at its strongest. We have linear time, stress induced ailments, boredom, hierarchies. Work is so bad that we need Reggie Perrin style fantasies of escape.

> *In fact, when examined from this point of view, it is rather the civilized way of life and its predication upon the supposed necessity, inevitability, even desirability if work that is limiting, repetitive and* ***boring!*** *...*

There is a call to escape:

> *Such efforts, in the face of increased official disapproval and active harassment, provide hope that there are ways for people to reclaim their lives, all life, from the work / consume / die imperatives of coercive, soul-destroying, biocidal civilization. May their numbers and achievements increase and continue! May others resist the programming they've received since childhood, and join them!*

## Ludic

The *Abolition of Work* is an important text here. Though his writing promotes Primitivist themes, it is not clear whether Bob Black himself *is* a Primitivist. Black is one of the most vociferous promoters of the Sahlins / Lee 'Primitive Affluence' anthropological material.[42] and is sceptical of technology. He does not seem dogmatic about this, being prepared to allow *some* machines to cut down the amount of human work. 'All the scientists and engineers and technicians freed from bothering with war research and planned obsolescence should have a good time devising means to eliminate fatigue and tedium and danger from activities like mining.'[43] Because the *Abolition of*

[41] Leigh Starcross, *Fully Unemployed*, GA39, Autumn 1995, p10
[42] Black, 'A Post Script to Sahlins', GA39, Autumn 1995, p 8.
[43] Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work*, (=AoW) 1981,GA pamphlet version published 1998, p 9

*Work*, (1980) remains the best statement of the 'Zero Work' perspective, and its use within Primitivism is so significant, I do not believe it is that important whether or not Black actually is a card carrying Primitivist. As with the Sahlins type anthropological material, it is more the way the text is used that is important.

## Indolence

Black acknowledges his debt to Karl Marx's son in law, Paul Lafargue, one who snored along the path to indolence before him.[44] 'No one should ever work' Bob Black declares, and calls for a 'ludic revolution'. Under the work ethic, people are literally working themselves to death. 'You are what you do', Black tells us. If you do boring, stupid, monotonous work, chances are you'll end up boring, stupid and monotonous.'[45] Work is really about social control. 'Once you drain the vitality from people at work, they'll likely submit to hierarchy and expertise in everything.'

## Return to Croatan

The 'Gone to Croatan' theme is there. 'Throughout the seventeenth century, English settlers defected to Indian tribes, or, captured in war, refused to return. But the Indians no more defected to white settlements than Germans climb the Berlin Wall from the west.'[46] Black mentions occupational hazards; injury or illness. 'Work is nothing to die for'. He cites historian Eugene Genovese who is said to claim 'factory workers in the Northern American states and in Europe were worse off than southern plantation slaves.'[47] 'What I really want to see,' Black tells us towards the end of his essay, 'is work turned into play.' Perhaps there might be a William Morris type turn towards the arts and crafts. 'Art would be taken back from the snobs and collectors, abolished as a specialised department catering to an elite audience, and its qualities of beauty and creation restored to integral life from which they were stolen by work.'[48] Black seeks 'the libidinisation of life'.

> *But the populace must be kept constantly under tension, the pressure of the bit must not be allowed to slacken.*
>
> White Rose, leaflet 3

[44] Paul Lafargue (1841–1911) married Laura, Karl Marx's daughter. He started out a Proudhonian, and lived in France and Spain. In 1883, while in prison, he wrote *The Right to be Lazy*. 'A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where a capitalist civilization holds its sway ...'

[45] Black, AoW p 4.

[46] Black AoW, p 6.

[47] Black, AoW, p8.

[48] Black, AoW, p11.

## Workplace Stress

In my opinion the related critique of stress in the workplace is one of the best aspects of Primitivism. Clearly, such criticisms of work are not unique to Primitivism, but both John Zerzan and Bob Black have been good on these topics. One example was Black's 'What's wrong with this picture?'[49] which reports on mass unemployment, with conditions worsening and work ratcheting up for those who still do it. Time to get out of those treadwheels. As Peter Good says 'the trouble with the rat race is, that even if you win, you are still a rat.'

## Getting Stuck In...

**If we do not *work* for the revolutionary changes we need in society, it is unlikely that they will ever come about. Over years, the most harmful thing I have seen is the debilitating effect of people lunching out. We need an *anarchist* work ethic. The laziness thinking has come to permeate the radical world. The consequence of holding a zero work perspective for radicalism has been to attract the lunch-out faction, the lazy, the idle, the people who really couldn't give a damn. At the same time, it repels the people who might work, who might get involved, who might have something more positive to offer. As a strategy for strengthening the radical protest movement, the zero work perspective is self defeating.**

## Work is a Four Letter Word

There are broader implications of the rejection of work, which need to be criticised. Firstly, it is necessary to oppose and to reject the condition of slavery, the demand of working for capitalism, which the state / system imposes over everyone. I go further than this though, and say that it is necessary, morally and politically to sabotage capitalism, to subvert, to undermine the state / system wherever possible. This does not imply though, that it is wrong or unnecessary to work for ourselves, to feed ourselves. We must provide for ourselves and for each other. We need to follow and fulfil our various existential needs, to be fully committed, to push forwards and promote our own interests and our radical projects. It is necessary, as far as we can, to withdraw from the state / system. As part of this, because attack is the best form of defence, it is necessary to put effort into radical politics. It is here where the 'Zero Work' ethos breaks down, because if we do not *work* for the revolutionary changes in society, it is unlikely that they will ever come about. We do not want a zero work ethic, we need an *anarchist* work ethic.

[49] Bob Black, *GA* 43/44, Autumn 1996, p17.

### Sack the Lunch-Outs

During my time in radical politics, by far and away the worst thing, the most harmful thing against radical politics I have seen is not the actions of the state, nor the attacks on us by the state-controlled media, (though these have all been bad) but the debilitating effect of people not turning up, not helping projects, not getting involved. The consequences for the protest movement, of holding to the zero work doctrine, is that the same thinking has permeated the radical world too. It reflects back on us. The zero work doctrine attracts the lunch-out faction, the lazy, the idle, the people who really couldn't give a damn. Zero work is telling people what they *want* to hear, rather than what they need. As such, from the point of view of radical publishers, in promoting this material, we have failed the movement. We have weakened it. As a recruiting strategy for strengthening the protest movement, the zero work perspective is self-defeating.

## 6. Technology as an enmeshed system that enslaves

The seeds of global warming, Aids, Chernobyl etc were implicit in the switch from hunter gathering to agriculture. When the caveman picked up the stone axe, we were all doomed. A typical Primitivist slogan says 'you don't use tools, tools use you.' This criticism resembles and relates to the Primitivist claim that it is not an ideology. If all our techniques are implicitly flawed, there is no escape. If all our tools are automatically tainted, there is no answer, no action we can possibly take. Without technology, (eg phones, computers, the internet and printing) how can social change come about? What are we supposed to think, to do, to use?

### A Dictatorship of Test Tubes

In *Renew This Earthly Paradise*[50] civilization is equated with a shackle, a pillory, a gallows, of 'slavery at home and conquest abroad'. In John Zerzan's article Technology[51] 'Technology is the sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of those separations mediating us from each other.' The Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers' (1883–1969) view that technology is neutral is emphatically rejected. 'Superficial faith in specialization and technical progress in increasingly seen as ludicrous.' Zerzan is impatient with the 'cowardice' and 'dishonesty' of writers who are pushing technology, or only half-heartedly critical of it. Zerzan attacks technology as leading to specialization and hierarchies. We become dependent upon experts. To him, hi-tec is characterised by negatives such as 'emptiness'; we are 'drained' , 'poisoned', our souls are 'shrunk and flattened' by it. Martin Heidegger is cited as one who originally

[50] Anon, 'Renew This Earthly Paradise' *Fifth Estate*, 1986.
[51] John Zerzan 'Technology' in *GA*42, Summer 1996, p8.

saw through technology, but whose nerve failed. Could Earth First! be going down the same path? Zerzan asks.

## Within The Net

Heidegger himself writes of 'the same dreary technological frenzy', of the standardisation of man, the pre-eminence of the mediocre. Positivism and Marxism are criticised, for Heidegger, the notion of the spiritual has been demoted.[52] Jacques Ellul, in his book *The Technological Society* (1954) predicted a world-wide totalitarian dictatorship by the year 2000. It will be 'a dictatorship of test tubes rather than hobnailed boots.'[53] Ellul has an image of how 'the state takes hold of a single thread of this network of technique, and little by little, it draws to itself all the matter and the method.'[54] Lewis Mumford, in his *Pentagon of Power*, writes of the 'Megamachine', the totalitarian system hardening, 'the system becoming immobile and rigid'[55]. It all becomes abstract, an end in itself:

> *Manual work into machine work: machine work into paper-work: paper work into electronic simulation of work, divorced progressively from any organic functions or human purposes, except those that further the power system.*[56]

Mumford's ideas are similar to Marcuse, and again the metaphor of flatness is invoked, man is not so much one dimensional, as 'underdimensioned.'[57]

## Interconnected Whole

The 'Soft' Primitivist Robert Heinberg, in 'Was Civilization A Mistake?'[58] asks if the environmental catastrophe is implicit to civilization? Civilization is compared to drug addiction, or as a disease. For the Unabomber, technology is connected together into an interlocking whole. 'Permanent changes in favour of freedom could be brought about only by persons prepared to accept radical, dangerous and unpredictable alteration of the entire system.' (*Manifesto,* section 111) Because it is connected together, the bad parts cannot be separated from the good parts (s 121). Technology, taken together as a whole, encroaches on freedom (s 128) 'The network of causes and effects is far too complex to be untangled and understood.' (s 105)

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[52] Martin Heidegger *Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr Ralph Manheim, Yale UP 1959, p 37.
[53] Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society tr Knopf, N Y 1964, p 453
[54] Ellul, *op cit*, p284.
[55] Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, Secker and Warburg, 1964, 1970, p 293
[56] Mumford, *op cit*, p 165
[57] Mumford, *op cit*, p 185.
[58] Robert Heinberg, 'Was Civilization A Mistake?' *GA*49/50, Autumn 1997, p 17.

## Dystopia

In *Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder*,[59] Bob Black sees technology racing ahead, faster and faster, going round and round in circles but essentially staying the same old totalitarianism. Stanley Diamond *In Search of The Primitive*,[60] describes how primitive people feared 'being isolated, depersonalised and therefore at the mercy of demonic forces' but that modern society has become all these things, a dystopia. The negation is internalised. Diamond uses the example of Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin's *We* (1929) about 'a maleficient version of Plato's *Republic*,' where through brain surgery rebels are stripped of their emotions: 'Zamiatin's description of the rebel rendered affectless, lucidly describing the changes on his beloved co-conspirator's face and feeling nothing as she dies anticipates Camus and transmits in its terrifying poignant flatness a psychological truth about our time.'

## Four Legs Good — Two Bad ...

Is the view that technology necessarily enslaves true? Such an opinion is fueled by a feeling that the problems are too complex and overwhelming to deal with — the best example here is global warming. Global warming, however, is a consequence of the aggregate of human actions and choices — internal combustion engines, airliners, air conditioning, the fetishes of car ownership and of tourism. The problem could be addressed by changing human behaviour. Technology has many aspects, some good, some bad, some neutral, and some ambiguous. The things produced by technology are used within a social and political *context*, according to the dictates of power and capitalism. If we abandon that whole area and do not challenge this, the totalitarianism will certainly spread, but that will be the result the power of the state / system and of our surrender, not necessarily as the result of technology, *per se*. So one criticism of the view that technology necessarily enslaves, and so must be rejected, is that this is one-sided, it is supported by the selective use of evidence. Rather than despairing over technology in the abstract, we would do better to look at examples of where technology has been put to a good use. *Why* are these examples good? What makes them so? Can these be expanded? Are there any particular features or techniques in them which we can appropriate for our own revolutionary project?

## Selective Use of Evidence

This leads into the second objection to the view that technology necessarily enslaves. As an abstraction, drawn from a one-sided, selective use of the evidence, such a view is not open to rational challenge. Opponents of Primitivism may cite positive uses of technology — the internet, pain-killers, penicillin, clean drinking water — but

[59] Bob Black 'Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder' *GA* 42, p13.
[60] Stanley Diamond 'In Search of the Primitive' *GA*42, p 9.

Primitivists will counter by referring to the tools / technology distinction. Each good use of technology is an example of the use of a *tool*, but (appeal to dogmatic principle) technology taken as a whole is still bad. This serves to expose the circularity of Primitivism here.

### Meeting The Challenge

The anti-technology doctrine of Primitivism brings with it certain consequences which weaken the revolutionary movement. The issue is really the way that technology is used, control, the power complexes behind this; vested commercial interests, political elites, social forces. It is necessary to unpack all this, to challenge it, to really change things. This implies a wide and far-ranging social movement. To build this is a complex and difficult task. What techniques will such a protest movement use? What facilities will it have? What levers will it take up to prise apart the edifice? By eschewing technology, Primitivists would make such a political movement that much weaker. The revolutionary task is hard enough already, without hobbling ourselves. Primitivists adopt a complete counsel of despair and their ideas are ultimately disempowering.

## 7. Hostility to Ideology, the denial that Primitivism is an Ideology

> *It's about controlling the faithful, pitching any line that will accumulate more power to the ideologue.*
>
> Camatte and Colli, 'On Organization' *GA* 45–46, p 10.

We can all agree among ourselves that Ideology is a bad thing, eh? Were it to be shown that Primitivism itself is an ideology, then this in itself would be fatal to it. Ergo, this is one admission that the Primitivist can never make. This refusal is in itself ideological. But all such standpoints are themselves ideologies (Postmodernism) One by one, the illusory, feeble, rotting matchwood platforms all crash down, one on top of another, Smash! Smash! Smash! Tough shit, kiddo, going down all the way it's just platforms...

### A Competitive Edge in the Market-Place of Ideas

The above paragraph is tongue in cheek, a *reductio ad absurdum*, but it does encapsulate the type of thinking which needs to be criticised here. Such hostility to ideology is by no-means unique to Primitivism, but common currency in radical circles. Primitivist apologetics recognize this, and believe that by showing themselves to be non-ideological, they can get ahead in their competition with the other -isms.

## An Open Door?

There is a danger, in arguing that Primitivism is an ideology, that most of the readers of this pamphlet will already accept this, and will not need much convincing. Nevertheless, it is necessary to follow this argument through. An ideology firstly contains such features as dogma, a general, wide-ranging belief system explaining the world and society; and secondly a programme to effect social and political changes upon that wider world through the activity of its members / adherents. In this sense, 'Ideology' has a thoroughly negative connotation, that people see the beliefs are distorted, its presuppositions warp its responses to the situation, skew them. Perhaps the pattern here is Leninism, and how it destroyed the Russian Revolution. Ever since then, ideology has had a bad name and is usually linked to authoritarianism, hierarchies and the closed minds of narrow political sects. In the round, it is quite clear that the doctrines of Primitivism constitute a belief system, an attempt to give a broad account of how things are — Technology is bad, global warming and the coalescing World Reich are the results of technology. It is also clear that the activities of the Primitivist 'true believers' are an attempt to change the world, putting into effect the Primitivist programme by persuading people to reject technology and return to the stone age or to go back to Croatan. Thus, Primitivism shares the features, it conforms to the description of ideology offered above. There is a *prima facie* case to answer. Primitivism *is* an ideology.

**Primitivism is not all one thing but a cluster of related ideas and beliefs, a family resemblance concept.**

## Ideological Conflict

We have to remember the two senses of Ideology described in the 'Preliminary Orientation' section. For clear practical reasons, the acknowledgment that Primitivism *is* an ideology is granted by the Unabomber, in the section of the *Manifesto* titled 'Strategy': In section 186, he says 'The revolutionary ideological strategy should therefore be developed on two levels.' In s 187, he calls for an intellectual form of ideology, 'On the more sophisticated level the ideology should address itself to people who are intelligent, thoughtful and rational.' In s 188, it says 'On a second level, the ideology should be propagated in a simplified form that will enable the unthinking majority to see the conflict of technology vs nature in unambiguous terms.' Thus, we see the Unabomber understands the struggle as an *ideological* conflict. 'Propaganda of the rabble-rousing type may be necessary when the system is nearing the point of collapse and there is a final struggle between rival ideologies to determine which will become dominant when the old world view goes under.' (s 188)

## More Dreary Ideology

In which sense of the word 'ideology' is the admission being made? The leading British Primitivist, John Moore, in his analysis of the *Unabomber Manifesto*, agrees. 'In place of critique, in place of vision, FC offers more dreary ideology. When rebel words are needed, FC gives tawdry tag-ends from the shopworn ideas of pop culture.'[61] Above, two senses were offered; one, narrow, as in the word used to describe a specific body of beliefs; and the other, of the broad sense where *everything* is ideological, and ideology itself is inescapable. Thinking in terms of the second, broader sense leads to a generalised feeling of hopelessness at the situation:

> *Any interpretation of how an anarchist society should be leads to ideology. Anarchy at its purest involves no coercion, no dominance of one person's belief over another. Any 'brand' of anarchy is not anarchy, and if successful, would only lead, 'Animal Farm' style, to the replacement of one repressive regime with another.* [62]

We can see the long shadow of Lenin there, but it is also about hierarchies and subject / object relations:

> *Ideology is about someone else telling you what to think and running your life for you, about being someone else's object, not a self-determining subject.* [63]

Here is a mixture of both the practical and of abstractions.

Then we get the question of competition, of organization issues and the all important matter of prestige:

> *The aim of formal groups is to dominate in some way. For example, dominance in the market or dominance of ideology, that is about how power should be arranged in society. Members of the group gain prestige by association but are rejected if their face doesn't fit or their ideologisation is not 'correct'.* [64]

## Outflanking

If ideology is seen as A Bad Thing, and Primitivism is an ideology, then Primitivism must be bad. The Primitivists try to outflank this type of objection by admitting that ideology is or seems inescapable. The task is that we must somehow break out

[61] John Moore, 'Beyond the Fragments' GA 51, Spring 1998, p 10.
[62] Anon 'Anarchy and Ideology' *GA* 45–46, Spring 1997.
[63] 'Against Ideology' *GA* 45–46, p 9.
[64] 'On Organisation' review of Camatte and Collu, *GA* 45–46 p 10.

of the dominant paradigm. As people making a bold, wide and far-ranging critique, Primitivists aim to transcend the prevailing culture. In fact, their beliefs are merely another expression of it. Primitivists fail to get beyond that orthodoxy. They can't run fast enough to get away because their pockets are weighed down with the same ideological baggage of presuppositions. The hermeneutic circle remains unbroken.

John Zerzan, for example, aligns himself with Marcuse, when he criticises technology: 'The very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological.'[65] Boo! For John Moore ideology is about the maintenance of systems of coercion and control, but also about recuperation:

> *In 'The Catastrophe of Postmodernism', John Zerzan has indicated that postmodernism, instead of containing radical potential, is the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism, and as such is concerned with recuperating radical resistance, rather than promoting it. Far from radical, the intellectual architects of postmodernism — figures such as Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard — are exposed as promoting an ideology that perfectly expresses the bankruptcy of industrial civilization.* [66]

## Refusal of Ideology

In John Zerzan's essay on reification, ideology is related to the increasingly petrified character of the bourgeois, postmodern consumer-world. 'Those who claim to have no ideology are so often the most constrained and defined by the prevailing ideology where it no longer enters consciousness.'[67] The ornamental fish inside the tank can never come to see the water they are swimming in. I conclude this section by recalling John Moore's refusal of ideology from his 'Primitivist Primer'.

> *Individuals associated with this current do not wish to be adherents of an ideology, merely people who seek to become free individuals in free communities, in harmony with one another and with the biosphere, and may therefore refuse to be limited by the term 'anarcho-primitivism' or any other ideological tagging.*[68]

## Archimedian Point

This view about ideology is connected to relativism and the whole Postmodernist project. Yet, there is something very wrong with the view that 'going down its all platforms' Here is a paradox — When we see for ourselves that something is wrong with

[65] John Zerzan 'Technology' *GA* 42, p 8.
[66] John Moore, 'Beyond Cruelty: Beyond Ideology' *GA* 45/46, p 13.
[67] John Zerzan 'That Thing We Do', *GA*51, p 14.
[68] Moore *Primitivist Primer.*

a particular belief system, we ourselves stand *outside* that ideology. Yet the countermove made by someone inside the ideology, to denounce our criticism as 'ideological' is in itself ideological. The problem is that such name calling does not address the issue of whether or not a particular criticism is true or false. Somebody who holds to a false ideology could still be telling the truth on this one point.

### Sign of Hope

Contrary to the Nietzschean perspectivist orthodoxy, there are two things we need to think about — the objective world of facts, and competing descriptions of this — where a description fails to correspond with the facts, it becomes useless as the foundation of a prescription for getting us out of this mess. The fact that we can see where things are going wrong, is a sign of hope. The reason why an ideological belief can be defective is a result, not just of ideology, (a causal explanation) but primarily of its lack of correspondence with the facts (a matter of detail). These issues are related. There is a standpoint outside ideology, from which we can analyse such things, but this is not Primitivism, rather, it starts from looking at the facts, and includes such difficult things as logic, argument and reason.

## 8. Primitivist hostility to Postmodernism

> *Nothing is true any more — everything is permitted.*
>
> Nietzsche *Genealogy of Morals*, 3rd Essay, Section 24[69]

In this section, I shall discuss three areas of Postmodernism. The fourth area, language, will be dealt with separately. The first area, is the subject of truth. 'Truth is a social construct' is standard Postmodernist fayre. 'It does not matter if it is true, but can it be sold?' is one cynical po-mo question. Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition*[70] writes of the crisis of narratives, the loss of legitimacy, the fragmentation of the world of knowledge. Included in with this breaking apart of things, is an unwillingness to judge between the true and the fake, a smudging of distinctions, of boundaries. In his earlier phenomenological work, Edmund Husserl demanded an *epoche*, the suspension of judgement, the refusal to take a stand (but later decided the European Humanities were sick and in crisis) Jacques Derrida, in his first work, wrote on Husserl's Geometry.[71] In the Derridean term *differance*, we can see this refusal in full flight, in the way that a concept can ambiguously both differ from something else, and also defer

[69] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Genealogy of Morals', tr Oxford UP 1996, p 126

[70] J F Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition' tr Bennington and Massumi, Manchester U Press, 1979.

[71] Jacques Derrida, *Husserl's Geometry,* tr NY, USA 1978, but see also *Speech and Phenomena, Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* tr D B Allison, Northwestern UP, 1973.

(ie subordinate itself) to it. Postmodernism is a kind of smudging, a refusal to honour distinctions. 'All interpretations are equally valid.'[72] "What is neither true nor false is reality."[73] 'Few people believe in objective reality' is another po-mo slogan. The difference between appearance and reality is just too much to deal with, man...

## Floating, Shimmering Goal-Posts

Much of this is not original, but follows from Nietzsche. 'Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.'[74] This denigration of the notion of truth leads to relativism. With no wider standard to judge, we are left with chaotic, fragmented, arbitrary, indeterminate, contingent pools. Nietzsche's perspectivism is the Postmodern orthodoxy.

> *Against positivism, which halts at phenomenon — 'there are only facts' — I would say: No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretation.* [75]

Nietzsche's perspectivism is motivated by his attack on morality. Against this, he asserts his Will To Power.

> *Whatever is useful for the preservation and enhancement of my life — that alone constitutes knowledge.* [76]

> *There are no facts. Everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is — our opinions.*[77]

> *The perspective therefore decides the character of the appearance! As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective!*[78]

Also important here is the chapter 'How The Real World at last Became a Myth' in *Twilight of the Idols*[79] "The 'real world' — an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer — an idea grown useless, superfluous, consequently a refuted idea: let us abolish it!" prefigures Baudrillard's four stages; a process whereby we begin with a reflection of basic reality, move on to masking and perverting that reality; thirdly we mark the absense of that reality, and fourthly, we make reality redundant, our

[72] Jonathan Culler, *Deconstruction*, p 19.

[73] Derrida *The Post Card From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago UP, 1987.

[74] Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, (1883–1888, published 1903) (=WTP) tr Kauffmann / Hollingdale, section 493.

[75] WTP section 481.

[76] WTP, section 637

[77] WTP, s 604

[78] WTP, s 567

[79] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Penguin, London, 1968, p 40.

images / signs bear no relation to reality at all, it becomes a simulacrum. Here, we find ourselves in a hyperreality of images breeding incestuously with each other in this disconnected domain.

**Primitivism grows out of the same soil, and is one in essence with Postmodernism. The Primitivist critique of Po-mo is itself an expression of Postmodernism; in making it they accept the ultimate authority of the sages, and refuse to transcend their methods.**

## Abolition of the Self

> *Of all things, the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.*
>
> Protagoras

The second Postmodern area to be looked at here, is the abolition of the self. We see this in a chilling phrase from Levi-Strauss: 'the goal of human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him.'[80] The sickness diagnosed by poor Husserl rages. It started with Nietzsche, that madman in the market place, dashing down his lantern, proclaiming the Death of God. Next, Roland Barthes, gave us the Death of the Author. Now, we have got as far as the self, the Death of Consciousness. Nietzsche it was who referred to 'the continual transitoriness and fleetingness of the subject.'[81] He declared the ego an error[82] and the subject a fiction[83] The Postmodernists have taken him up on the offer.

## Shipwrecked Hulk

The main villain here is Jacques Lacan, who famously declared the self a fiction, a false construct.[84] In his essay on the 'mirror stage' Lacan makes word-play about the supposed battle going on inside the personality — *stade* being the French word for stage, but also stadium as in battle. When the baby looks into the mirror he / she recognises himself / herself, but this beginning of self recognition is tainted. Lacan writes of it as a trap, a decoy. Always, there is this gap between the reality and the image (as with the mirror's left to right inversion) or the conflict between the specular 'I' and the social 'I'. The result of this is fragmentation, division, inner turmoil. Lacan calls the mirror image a 'phantom' and characterises this supposed first step towards self-definition 'the paranoiac principle of human knowledge'. For Lacan, from there

[80] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* tr Weidenfeld London 1966, p 247.
[81] Nietzsche, WTP, section 490.
[82] WTP s 518.
[83] WTP s 297.
[84] Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' essay in *Escrits*, tr Alan Sheridan, Tavistock, London 1977.

inwards things can only get worse. Foucault follows a similar path, the self is to be cut off from its activities, and broken up like a shipwrecked hulk: 'the researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology, have 'decentred' the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse.'[85]

## Ludic

The third area of Postmodernism I wish to look at here is the question of style. The assault on truth, the adoption of relativism, smudging, refusal to make distinctions, and the denigration of the self brings certain consequences. We find, throughout Postmodernist writings, an emphasis on play. Heidegger perhaps began this with all his games about words, puns, pseudo-etymologies, but Wittgenstein also has something to do with this in talk about 'language games'. We have already seen how this relates to Primitivism — 'Up The Ludic Revolution!' etc. There is a sense in which Postmodernists take up and express the aimlessness and drifting of contemporary society. Po-mo is the perfect form for a world full of shallow and ephemeral motels, strip malls, high rise flats, theme parks, motorways — a world with no past, a saturated, bloated, meaningless present and doubtful future.

## Essentially, the Same Destination

So we must now turn to Primitivism. One type of criticism of Primitivism (that of the question of its logical coherence) looks at the beliefs, and declares them contradictory or meaningless. The second type of criticism (a practical objection), tells us that using Primitivism will not get us out of this mess. To see that Primitivists defer to Postmodernism is an objection of the second type. Primitivism is not a route map to a 'free society in harmony with nature' because its destination is just another segment of the same depressing Postmodernist wasteland. Indeed, the 1980s Primitivists understood their project as a sub-set of Postmodernism. We have already seen that the original 1986 *Fifth Estate* article 'Renew This Earthly Paradise',[86] proclaimed 'an emerging synthesis of post-modern anarchy and the primitive (in the sense of original) Earth-based ecstatic vision.' The same quotation was repeated in John Moore's 'Primitivist Primer' (1996)

## Taking Po-mo One Stage Further

We can all construct the Postmodern wasteland — a realm of images; no truth, no self, only style. 'The medium is the message', endlessly drifting, recycled, shallow,

[85] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Tavistock, London 1972.
[86] Renew This Earthly Paradise *Fifth Estate* issue 322, 1986

ephemeral, a saturated domain; cynical, ironic. It might be something like the Borg Cube out of *Star Trek*, or the nightmare computer world depicted in *The Matrix* film. Try to imagine how it would be possible to take Postmodernism one stage further.

## For Sale — One Dialectical Myth

What is the dialectical opposite of the Postmodern wasteland? It has to be something unmediated, nature rather than culture. It might be like a religious millennial vision, a golden future age, except that under po-mo there is no future, and no religious faith. A simulacrum, to use the jargon, a vision offered cynically, perhaps? What place truth in this? So let's rewind the videotape back to the start. Stop all that mass production, the consumption, pollution, this is a Deep Ecology vision thing, with respect for nature. Picture a world with no hierarchies, where men and women are equal, where property has been abolished. It is a society without aggression and violence, where children are valued as full members of society, and people do not eat meat. People are fully in tune with their inner selves, and their inner selves are in an *unmediated* relationship with nature. The hot sun shines down in its timeless way. The kids are gonna go for this, I tell you. Instead of heading for Gotham City, let's all chill out in the Kalahari Desert...

## Reason

*Pace* the Detroit Primitivists, an account of Primitivism has got to account for the fact that some Primitivists are hostile to Postmodernism. For John Zerzan, Postmodernism is a catastrophe.[87] Zerzan offers an account of Postmodernism as 'a kind of vacancy'. "Postmodernism, and not just in the arts, is modernism without the hopes and dreams that made modernity bearable."[88] The reader is tempted to conclude from this that Primitivism intends to put the hopes and dreams back, but this does not seem to be Zerzan's direct intention here, though it may indeed be his effect. Postmodernists have a sense of disillusionment with reason. Do the Primitivists share this? For, here is a paradox; the po-mo sage may denigrate reason as leading from the Enlightenment, via Positivism and Marxism, through Auschwitz and Hiroshima, to this present awfulness; but then again, he or she must also use reason to argue for a position.

## Status of The Primitivist Individual

Zerzan quotes William Burroughs "Your 'I' is a completely illusory concept."[89] (but who is Burroughs addressing?) Under Postmodern capitalism, the individual is com-

[87] John Zerzan, 'The Catastrophe of Postmodernism' *Future Primitive*, (=FP) pp 101–134.

[88] Zerzan, *FP* p 108.

[89] Investigating Postmodernism, interpreting it in terms of capitalism, one finds Zerzan here echoing what Marcuse might have been saying, had he lived to see it.

pletely lost in this wasteland, a cypher, a unit, endlessly duped into buying the same old recycled rubbish, utterly locked in to the self-referrential world of all this techno-crap. Zerzan quotes Eagleton. The pomo subject is "a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion."[90] Yet, how is such a person different from the Primitivist living in the Kalahari Desert or at Croatan? We have to set Zerzan's criticism of Postmodernism alongside his account of primal lifeways: "Now we can see that life before domestication / agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health."[91] a life of "openness and communion with nature."[92], a world with no time, no symbolization, no art. We find the familar po-mo refusal of morality, of making judgements: "Free scope is allowed for every conceivable kind of personality outlet or expression in Primitive society. No moral judgement is passed on any aspect of human personality as such."[93] or of mysteries: "Watching them one felt in the presence of some age old mystery, lost by the civilized world."[94]. When we think about the Primitivist individual, and set this alongside the Postmodernist person, *in their own environment,* do we not see that they are *both* swallowed up by it?

**Instead of heading for Gotham City, let's all chill out in the Kalahari Desert...**

## The Vultures Circle

Postmodern culture is vacuous, but Primitivist culture is — ??? With no symbolization, language, no art, are they even *allowed* to have a culture? Postmodern life is a cold struggle for existence; mortgages, clothing bills on credit cards, economic cycles, redundancy, while the creditors hover. Primitivists sit in the cold with no shelter and little clothing, watching the vultures circle, fighting off the hyenas with stones. The Postmodernist is submerged in with the city, until he becomes a machine. Traffic, MTV, the Turner Prize, everything is noise, words, images, nobody listens. The Primitivist 'communes with nature', which is to say she merges with the forest, *becomes* the desert, and essentially subsumes herself into the cosmic silence. And that's it... The conclusion here is that both environments pose a similar threat of total negation against my existence. Fundamentally, there is no qualitative difference between them.

[90] *FP*, p110.
[91] 'Future Primitive' (the essay) *FP* p 16.
[92] *FP* p 25.
[93] *FP* p 35.
[94] *FP* p 32.

## Deep Ecology

Neither Primitivism nor Postmodernism is any answer, but there is a structural relationship between the two visions; the one is a dialectical inversion of the other. They both inhabit the same theoretical wilderness. Reading Zerzan on *The Catastrophe of Postmodernism*, at first, superficially, we see that as far as it goes, his criticism has some truth to it as a rejection of Postmodernism. *But it is not necessary to be a Primitivist to make these criticisms.* Looking deeper, we see that his method is implicity Postmodern, a posture. Underlining Zerzan's account, is that basic Deep Ecology assumption that nature is of value in and for itself. "Postmodernism is apparently what we are left with when the modernization process is complete, and nature is gone for good."[95][96]

## Pseudo-Radicals

If the primacy of nature is an underlay to Zerzan's analysis of Postmodernism, the overlay is a political criticism of it. Postmodernism stems from failure and loss of nerve after the student revolts of May 1968. "Derrida announced that deconstruction 'instigates the subversion of every kingdom'. In fact, it has remained within the safely academic realm of inventing ever more ingenious textual complications to keep itself in business and avoid reflecting on its own political situation."[97] Going down all the way it's just texts laid on top of texts... Part of the problem is the devaluation of the word 'radical'. Having people like Blair call themselves 'radical' has given radicalism a bad name. Part of this problem is a consequence of the self-perpetuating character of academic elites, the fact they are beholden to governments for their funding, to establishment publishers for their oxygen of publicity. There should be no surprise at all that Postmodernism supports and enhances the power of the system. This brings us to an examination of the political role of *The Catastrophe of Postmodernism* and such similar texts within the Primitivist movement. Again, we return to the valid criticism made in *The Primitive Confusion* pamphlet[98] that Zerzan's mass of quotations set up an intimidating 'wall of culture', constituting 'the terrorism of evidence'. This, of course, is in itself an act of deference to Postmodernism, the feature of self referentiality. 'Going down all the way its just texts...' The political effect of this stylistic feature on the potential believer, the potential activist, is what is important here. To attract them, to inspire their support, it must conform to their expectations of the postmodern *style*, and in this, the content itself is a side issue.

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[95] 'Catastrophe of Postmodernism', FP p 119.

[96] There are two senses of nature, one that of our core being, as in 'human nature', the other that of trees, plants, animals, rivers, mountains, etc. Primitivism implies a merging of the two.

[97] FP, p 114.

[98] *The Primitive Confusion*, p 6.

### Kulturkampf

John Moore, in 'Beyond Cruelty: Beyond Ideology; the Poverty of Postmodernism'[99] is a report about a critical leaflet handed out at the 13th September 1996 '100 Years of Cruelty' conference in Australia, "to the consternation of the conference organisers." Activists were angered at the posturing of the Postmodernists, with Derrida paying 'Homage to Chiapas', and insincerely adopting the mantle of the Zapatistas. The title recalls George Orwell's 'Homage to Catalonia' but they make the point that at least Orwell went and fought with the POUM in Spain. 'Why not stop wallowing in your oh-so vicarious and voyeuristic artistic pretensions, and go and join the Zapatistas?' the leaflet asks. Angered at the 'parasitic recuperation' of Artaud on offer, distrustful of metanarratives, the leaflet rejects ideology: "Ideology, be it the ideology of drugs, art, psychoanalysis, theosophy or revolution, is the one thing that never changes history in the slightest" in favour of poetic, wild, revolutionary insurgency. "Three thousand years of darkness will not withstand ten days of revolutionary violence." Though a brave attempt, it is difficult to see how this intervention really changes anything. Derrida, Kristeva, Sam Weber, Allen Weiss, Sylvere and the other celebs are left in place, free to peddle their wares afterwards. The trendy university linguistics departments are left intact. From all this, we are left with the impression that all that is possible are aimless disconnected myths, eternally circulating in a marginalised, irrelevant counter-culture, either this or transient gestures.

## 9. Hostility to symbolization

> *But true expression, like th' unchanging sun*
> *Clears and improves what 'er it shines upon*
> *It gilds all objects, but it alters none.*
>
> Alexander Pope *An Essay on Criticism*, (1711)

The type of defective thinking exemplified by Postmodernists hates boundaries, hates making distinctions, hates commitment. True / false, reality / language, right / wrong, body / mind — these divides are anathema. Postmodernists seek a unified field; ontologically their world must ultimately be all one thing. Po-mo is Monistic.[100] We have already seen its attack on the self — Postmodernists have a special disdain for Cartesianism; the view that there are ultimately two types of things, physical bodies

[99] *GA*45 / 46., Spring 1997, pp13-14

[100] Similarly in politics, postmodern states are tearing down boundaries; the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Europe into a single bloc, the USA as the single superpower, and an increasing tendency towards a single homogeneous Reich.

and minds.[101] Similarly, because it is such a mess of falsehood and pseudo-problems, Postmodernists have a problem with reality itself.[102]

## Language Is All

'There is nothing outside the text' Jacques Derrida famously proclaimed. This Postmodern turn towards text began with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)[103] who pointed out the arbitrariness of the relationship between the word 'yellow' and the experience of yellow. Drawing further back from the real, people like Lacan suggested that meaning is a result of the relationship between the signs, not a result of connection or representation of something outside language/ text. The subject and language are split, alienated, one way of dealing with the divide is to suggest that language completely swallows up the subject. Language is all. This connects with the denial of the self as discussed in the previous section. Declaring the self a fiction, Lacan claimed that consciousness is structured as a language.[104] Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes, Foucault similarly reduce all knowledge to text, Derrida for example declaring that we have no access to reality except through concepts, codes, categories. In Baudrillard, we find an endless circulation of signs, related to other signs. He uses the analogy of a mirror facing towards another mirror. In Postmodernism, the collective enterprise here is built on 'Intertextuality'.

## I Can't Get Started

For a while, there was much talk about sign and signified, and 'Semiotics'. This phase rather ended with the Paul de Man affair.[105] The Postmodernist approach depends on an implied but unreasonable demand for *absolute* perfection, but this is not met in its own texts. An analogy to use here is that of a chain of geometrically perfect gear wheels. Such a set up could never move, because there is no give in the system — no play between the cogs. (No backlash.) The driving wheel is locked by the driven. Communication demands a little slack to get started. The other side of the appeal for total perfection, is the search for things missed out, 'blind spots', the *aporia*. Following on from Heidegger, but especially modelled on Freudian Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction tries to dredge up things which have been suppressed. In all this, meaning is essentially arbitrary, nothing is fixed, all is playful, or outright deceptive. (eg *differ-*

[101] Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, no 4. 1637.

[102] One such pseudo-problem is the charge of 'logocentrism'; the material by Derrida regarding the privileging of writing over speech. *Grammatology*, Baltimore USA, 1977.

[103] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* 1916, tr Roy Harris, Duckworth, London 1983.

[104] Lacan, *Escrits*, tr Sheridan, Tavistock, London, 1977.

[105] David Lehman, *Signs of the Times*, Deutsch, London, 1991.

*ance*) Relativism is the Postmodern orthodoxy. According to Frederic Jameson[106] text breaks apart into a series of linguistic islands.'

## Running on Emptiness

The Zerzanian themes of his critique of time, number, language, art and culture all have Postmodern resonances. Symbolization leads to domestication, the slavery of civilization. These themes were explored in his *Elements of Refusal*[107] and they perhaps come to an apex in his essay 'Running on Emptiness'[108] Zerzan turns his polemical firepower on symbol. As with Postmodernism itself, always there is this dispiriting gulf between the signified and the sign. How awful is this gap! "the extent to which thought and emotion are tied to symbolism is the measure by which absence fills the inner world and destroys the outer world." (the primacy of text over reality) To Zerzan, representation is like a biblical fall, the place where humanity lost its initial innocence. Though he does not like this at all, Zerzan accepts this standard po-mo assumption of the priority of language. "At present we live within symbols to a greater degree than we do within our bodily selves or directly with each other." Symbols dominate our perceptions, they weaken our sense of the immediate, the intuitive.

## Consolation

Somehow, things have been turned topsy-turvy: "Images are in the saddle, riding life." Symbols are all about domination, mastery, he writes about the 'Empire of the Symbol'. This is linked with aggression. The word culture comes from Latin 'cultura', to do with the cultivation of the soil. Along with this comes existential fragmentation inside, and the specialization of labour in the external, social world. "A restless spirit of innovation and anxiety has largely been with us ever since." Culture is seen as a mechanism of consolation for the psychic loss of wholeness. Zerzan claims the step of agriculture was 'refused' through much of the Paleolithic Age, cave art appearing perhaps 30,000 years ago and agriculture at 10,000. This 'refusal' is a mystery, he thinks. Why did it take so long? The inference is that the primitive people knew full well that agriculture was a bad thing.

## Great Cartesian Anxiety

Descartes appears as part of this picture, as an emblem of this 'estrangement'. We are so alienated from our bodily selves that we have created this artificial gulf between the physical and mental, this 'Great Cartesian Anxiety'. Following Mircea Eliade *The*

[106] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 1991.
[107] John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal,* Left Bank Books, 1988.
[108] John Zerzan, 'Running on Emptiness' *GA*45 / 46 Spring 1997, pp 22–24

*Myth of the Eternal Return*[109] Zerzan tells us primitive people fear time. Levi-Strauss says "the characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness" However, the Postmodern universe is similarly timeless — 'The End of History', cyberspace, the theory that time is somehow irrelevant in hyperreality, of images from the past endlessly cycled and recycled, and having a kind of immortality.[110]

## Postmodern Symptoms

'Absence is a cultural constant.' 'Presentness is deferred in the symbolic'. 'the symbol is the universe of humanity' recalling Derrida's dictum 'there is nothing outside the text', this is the cultural wasteland Zerzan wishes to get away from, but nevertheless accepts as an accurate and complete description of the present day condition. Zerzan quotes Thomas McFarland "Culture primarily witnesses the absence of meaning, not its presence." We can accept that this is a fair description of postmodern culture, but it is not true of culture as a whole. Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto, the poem by T S Eliot, Little Gidding, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Turner's Fighting Temerarie painting, Charlie Parker's saxophone break on Night in Tunisia — the bookshelves, galleries, records, museums, walls are full of this stuff. There is plenty more where this came from. Despite the efforts of the Postmodernists, culturally the human race is not finished yet.[111] And furthermore, isn't the work of the Primitivists itself a contribution to that human culture, a world of which they are so disparaging?

## Leap of Faith

The attack on language is an example of the jump into abstraction. This is how it works: All around us we have problems, and at the start, people study the details of these. At this stage, things are purely factual, of the order of 'if you cut your finger on something sharp, it will bleed' Problems then pile up on top of problems, and things begin to get complicated. You notice though, that they tend to run in chains of cause and effect, and the further up the chain you get, the greater the influence on a wider range of problems. There comes a point where the step by step nitty-gritty approach is eventually abandoned. Maybe there is a short cut. Perhaps there is one single higher factor, which feeds into all the others. Attack this single factor, and all the others will be affected too. So there is a shift from fact into speculation. It is a leap of faith beyond specific detail into generalisation, into the abstract. But what if your leap in the dark is wrong? The Zerzanian Primitivists, in their rejection of language and symbol, make this kind of move. Symbolization is not the cause of all our problems.

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[109] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton UP, 1954.

[110] One good example of this was the beer ad with modern comedian Griff Rees-Jones talking to Marilyn Monroe.

[111] Even alienated work like Kafka's The Trial says something that is important and true about the human condition..

## Pan Psychism

Primitivists accept the cynical despair of the Postmodernists, and disparage symbolization or language, seeking to replace this with pan-psychism, a non-mediated merging with the wilderness. You will recall:

> *Where the modern's gods might inhabit the eland, the buffalo, or the blade of grass, the Neanderthal's spirit was the animal or the grass blade, the thing and its soul perceived as a single vital force, with no need to distinguish them with separate names.*[112]

Zerzan's despair over representation is sited within the Postmodernist description of the situation. "It is past time to see such pronouncements as ideology, serving to shore up the elemental falsification underneath a virtually all-encompassing false consciousness." Shades of Lacan, shades of Derrida. Part of this is a hierarchy, this time not of writing over speech, but of the symbolic over non-symbolic. Notice the value judgement in this: 'That we have declined from a non-linguistic state begins to appear a sane point of view." And so to hunting, domestication, sexual inequality, specialization, ritual. 'The End of Eden' brings with it the curse of civilization, present conditions require that we erase all this.

## Language merges into Style

Other Primitivist texts could be cited to show the fundamentally Postmodern assumptions and character within Primitivist thinking. Sometimes when we talk of language, we are also discussing style. Of particular note here is John Moore's 'Commentary on the Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto.'[113] where Moore informs us of his dislike of the 'anarcho-primitivist' label. Perhaps it might be renamed the 'post-civilization current'. Thus, with the stroke of a pen, the status of the primitive in 'Primitivism' is called into question in a characteristically Postmodern way. (The primacy of text again.) So much for all that polemic wasted on arguing the toss about Marshall Sahlins and the 'Primitive Affluence' thesis! If Postmodernism is 'a catastrophe' then perhaps this is a good thing, increasing alienation and helping to assist in and speed up the downfall of this present system. We see something of this in the article, where the Russian Futurists cry 'Death to World Civilization' and urge the 'dark masses' to 'take up their axes and destroy everything.' There is a similar posturing in the Rogerian slogan 'For The Destruction of Civilization'.

[112] Zerzan, 'Running on Emptiness', *GA*45–46, p 22.
[113] John Moore 'Commentary on the Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto', *GA*40/41, Spring 1996, p 18.

### Double-Coding

On a similar theme, an important text to consider is T Fulano 'Civilization is Like A Jetliner'[114] Airliners are all about pollution, destruction of wildlife, speed. Businessmen, all the same, sit in rows. Airports are like scar tissue across the face of the earth, but civilizations also collapse into junk like crashing airliners. Postmodernism too, is a form of "collapsing into junk". There is an uneasy ambivalence here, as with the Postmodern technique of 'double coding'. Like a reluctant Futurist, Fulano would almost like to be intoxicated with the velocity of the thing, but s/he knows it is bad for her/him, and destruction wins out. There is something fascinating, but also Postmodern about the shards of broken metal on the ground. If everything is text, what do these signify?

### Reification

Marxists, especially after Lukacs and the Frankfurt School, made much talk of 'reification'.[115] Marcuse applied the concept of 'reification' to technology, and Zerzan takes up the Reification theme in 'That Thing We Do'[116] It is a major fault with this essay that Zerzan does not set out a clear definition of his topic, much beyond a vague declaration that reification is 'thingification'. In this instance, the process is related to consumerism — those Reebok trainers — commodity fetishism. Again, we get reduced, diminished down to language, to signs. Zerzan quotes the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* "The speechiform is a mere sorrogate." Reification is seen as the corollary of symbolization; as the spiritual or mental world empties, we become fixed inside this commodity world, this world of things. So far, so metaphysical. As far as any sense can be made of this, it seems to assume the Postmodern commodity landscape as a complete picture of the human condition, so once again, Zerzan's analysis is subordinate to Postmodernism.

## 10. Poetry and myth

There are two aspects to the relationship between Primitivism and myth. The first is to claim that Primitivist discourse is itself a form of mythology. This might be meant as a non-evaluative description, or as a criticism. The second aspect is about how Primitivist writers have consciously used mythology as a genre.

To start with the first. Primitivist discourse is an expression of myth. A myth is a form of sacred story, which belongs to a particular tradition, and has a universal dimension to it. Myth often invokes the supernatural, or deals with questions about the origins of the world or universe, or explains the origins of mankind, or the basis of values.

[114] Originally published in *Fifth Estate* (n.d.) republished *GA* 43/44 Autumn 1996, p13.

[115] Reification is to convert something mentally into a thing, to turn an abstraction into a material thing. Hypostatization is to attribute real existence to abstractions.

[116] Zerzan 'That Thing We Do' *GA*51, Spring 1998, p14.

Bronislaw Malinowski considered myths as the charters of institutions. Primitivists, particularly with their account of the primal world as an intended future destination for humanity, together with the negative view of industrial-technological society, fit this definition. The origins of the present rise out of agriculture, hierarchy and division of labour. The present is seen as (to use Lewis Mumford's term) a *Kakotopia*. We must get away, we must leave, we must go 'Back to Croatan'. As a past and future condition of humanity the primitive world represents both an Eden and an eschatological state.

**What is strange here is the attempt to use scientific research (archaeology and anthropology) about primitive life-ways to support a project which ultimately rejects science.**

## Origins Fallacy

To claim that Primitivist doctrine is a form of myth, as the basis for a criticism, is to assert that it is vague, fictional, non-objective, that it is not knowledge. Such criticism carries weight with people outside the Primitivist cult, potential converts to it, but these comments would be rejected by Primitivists themselves, who denounce objectivity and other such categories as scientific. Primitivism's mythological status is *precisely* the point. Science has brought us to where we are now. Something else is needed beyond the accepted norms of scientific knowledge and discourse.

## Genealogy of Error

It is a common error in thinking, the 'Genealogical Fallacy' that to 'explain' something is to give an account of its origins. The Primitivist illusion here is that to counteract the toxicity of our present condition, we must recapitulate the distant past, and not make that crucial mistaken step from hunter gatherers to agriculture (Zerzan) or to water irrigation technologies (Perlman) again. Linked to this delusion is a mythic idolization of primitive peoples as a role model, a pattern to be emulated. We can see the limitations of the genealogical model, by applying the technique to Primitivism itself. What are its origins? We could look at thinkers like Lukacs, Marcuse, Ellul, Mumford, Nietzsche, Junger, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, Sahlins, Perlman, Watson, Zerzan. It would be possible to build up a family tree in this way, but this is a different business from explaining the ideas within Primitivism themselves. Origins are distinct from nature or character, the internal detail of the thing.

## Hardcore Versus Softcore

Here, I want to distinguish between the Hardcore Primitivists, who take the call literally, as the central part of a project to move away from civilization and technology; and the Softcore Primitivists, who understand the call in a metaphorical, spiritual or existential sense. I think it would be a grave mistake to try to classify these thinkers

in a hard and fast way, as either on one side of the line or the other. Each contains aspects of both, but the practical types are rare, and on the whole, Softcore Primitivism predominates. At stake in this is the precise status of Primitivist doctrine. Is the Return to Croatan a literal call, or metaphorical? Is it the goal of a practical political and social programme, or a Postmodern simulacrum? What is strange here is the attempt to use scientific research (archaeology and anthropology) about primitive life-ways to support a project which ultimately rejects science. The literal Primitivists seek to appropriate the prestige of science to bolster up their claims about primitive lifeways. The Existential Primitivists on the other hand double-mindedly interpret this as a type of irony (or evade / ignore the issue). The Call to Croatan is not literal, but an image, to be played about with; the anthropology is just part of the texture.

## Attention to Content?

Postmodern Primitivists play with the image of 'Croatan' or the Kalahari bushmen, and this is essentially chimerical, adopted as an Existential *leitmotif*. Here Primitivism is at its weakest, about as far from a practical programme to bring about real human liberation as it is possible to get. It is here that Existential Primitivism promises most, but delivers least; but paradoxically *could* have become the strongest form of Primitivism of all. Nowhere do we see this conflict between possibility and realization more than in the work of John Moore. If the Unabomber represents the edge of the Hardcore Primitivism spectrum, Moore is his polar-opposite. The turn taken towards mysticism by John Moore keeps this strand of Primitivism firmly in the aesthetic register, expressing sensations, feelings.

One of the criticisms levelled against Heideggerian Existentialism was this emphasis on decision, decision alone divorced from any social context. Thus one could just as well commit oneself to Communism, Marxism, Catholicism, or (as with Heidegger himself) Fascism; the commitment itself was what counted, Existentialists were blind to the context of that commitment, they offered no specific guidance.[117] In Moore's case the Existential content becomes the trendy pagan mysticism of Starhawk, Zen Buddhism, hallucinogenics, Tantric Yoga sex rites, New Age material. These practices are of dubious political value as the means to the end of political liberation from the Megamachine. With Moore, the pass is sold.

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[117] This is the critique offered by Hans Jonas, see G Neske and E Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, Paragon, NY,1991, pp 197 -205.

## Paradigm Lost

> *Locating origins is a way of identifying what can be safely salvaged from the wreck of civilization, and what is essential to eradicate if power relations are not to recommence after civilization's collapse.*
>
> John Moore, *Primitivist Primer*

The second aspect of Primitivism here is about how Primitivist writers consciously use myth as a genre. In this, the figure of John Moore is important. In *Anarchy and Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days*[118], using John Milton's 'Paradise Lost', Moore deals with the myth of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Christian theology characterises humanity as 'fallen' — tainted with original sin. There is something implicit within us all, which is evil. The William Golding novel 'Lord of the Flies' portrays this. Eden is spoiled, even the schoolboys carry it with them.[119] The Garden of Eden is not so much an explanation about origins, as in something long past, rather it applies to the present, and has to be continually applied, applied and re-interpreted.

## Reclaim The Spiritual

Above, it was shown that Moore quotes Mikhail Bakunin's *God and the State*: "Religious issues constitute a vacuum at the centre of anarchism which limits its appeal and cogency."[120] Moore repudiates the religious categories of faith, the 'obscenities' of worship, pietism, sanctimoniousness, sin, mortification, martyrdom. "Nevertheless, the necessity remains for proponents of anarchy to reclaim, what for want of a better word, and despite its antipathetic connotations, can only be termed spirituality." Moore finds this in Zen — through the practices of Zazan, Koan and the mentor-neophyte relationship. In 'Ecdysis' (=slipping out) he examines the question of clothing. In using animal skins to dress Adam and Eve, Moore suggests that God committed the primal murder. The taboo about clothing is broken by such things as nudism and strippergrams, and was also overturned by the Adamites.[121] Perlman is quoted: 'Theories of liberation are the clothes of dictators'.

## Bewilderness

Moore's most important essay in *Anarchy and Ecstasy* is 'Bewilderness'. Starting from etymology, wilderness is declared 'self-willed-land'. Wilderness is a place not

[118] John Moore, *Anarchy and Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days*, Aporia, London, 1987.

[119] Similar territory is crossed in Golding's *The Inheritors*, where the innocent Neanderthal's are destroyed by violent Cro-Magnon man.

[120] Moore, *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, p 10.

[121] The case of the nudist campaigner Vincent Bethell is a recent example of this tendency.

subject to control, order, domination. It has a numinousness. Over time, the control-complex imposed a negative connotation on the word, as in 'bewilder', to confuse, to mentally disorientate. Moore proposes a neologism, 'bewilderness' to try to circumvent the negative connotations. Wilderness was a 'pathless place' with no Roman roads, nor Islamic merchant's trade routes to cut across it.

It was:

> *a state inhabited by wilful, uncontrollable natural energies. In such states, humans surrendered their individuality, renounced personal volition to the will-of-the-land, and merged individuated desire within the expansive needs of the wild.* [122]

## Effing the Ineffable

This merging is understood as an ecstatic surrender of the ego, through initiation into the mysteries, the experience having features such as terror, wonder, merging with the Cosmic All. It is achieved using hallucinogenics, tantric sex rites, bringing the individual to the very edge of personal dissolution, and swamping it as a psychological, physical, social and ethical entity.[123] "The experience denoted by bewilderness remains crucial for all proponents of anarchy, who recognize that syncopating the spiral dance could facilitate total revolution."

## Flattening the Wall

John Moore calls for "an evacuation of and from the evacuating control complex."[124] One way of achieving this is through Starhawk's 'magical wordless chants'. Moore writes of an image she uses of Younger Self / Talking Self / Deep Self. There is a house with a garden. Deep Self inhabits the caves underneath this while Talking Self builds a wall round the garden. Animals and plants from outside have to be brought in through the garden, with its paths and boundary. "Hence in terms of Starhawk's metaphor, the central issue should not be tending the garden, making it more hospitable, indeed civilized, but rather flattening the wall."

## Lovebite

In *Lovebite: Mythology and the Semiotics of Culture*,[125] Moore uses the fairy story of 'Little Red Riding Hood' as the launch point for a critique of patriarchy. In essence,

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[122] John Moore, *Anarchy and Ecstasy,* p 21. 'Bewilderness' was also published in GA 54/55, Spring 1999, p 10.

[123] John Moore, *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, p 22.

[124] *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, p 23.

[125] John Moore, *Lovebite: Mythology and the Semiotics of Culture,* Aporia, London 1990.

the myth of the Wild Horde, taken from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1912 )[126] is inverted. If patriarchy is controlling, authoritarian, matriarchy is benign. It is still about origins, interpreted Existentially:

> *But for contemporary proponents of anarchy, the crucial issue remains the light thrown on the most ancient and deeply seated control structures in the present psychosocial environment.* [127]

It comes down to language. The poetic is contrasted with the prosaic. Stripped of its context and function, the poetic atrophies. Prosaic language takes over. "The mechanical style, which began in the counting house, has now infiltrated into the university, some of its most zombiesque instances occurring in the works of eminent scholars and divines."[128] Moore then procedes to use the myth of the Cannibal Monster, as told by Tenskwatawa in 1813, to illustrate the need for a total, existential opposition to Leviathan.

## Postmodern

On narrow and pedantic grounds, *Lovebite* was criticised by reviewer Debye Highmountain in the Summer 1991 issue of *Fifth Estate*. The reasons for the hostile review are clear enough; that Moore was seen as a potential threat, a rival to their own theoretical hegemony. What is more interesting however, is Moore's Postmodern defence[129] "Here's the real source of my disappointment ..." Moore told *Fifth Estate*, "it doesn't notice what I'm trying to do with form, style and language." Citing the epigram taken from Rousseau reproduced at the head of *Lovebite*, Moore claimed it was not a matter of historical accuracy as such. "I'm trying to push back the boundaries of anarchic textuality." He then appealed, not to the chthonic energies, but rather to the authority of the Postmodern sages: "Foregrounding the constructed nature of the text exposes the artificial nature of all ideological representation and liberates those suppressed energies delimited by Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva." Taking his cue from Lyotard, Moore wished to subvert master marratives:

> *Unlike many* FE *writers, I don't believe that one can unproblematically engage with primal lifeways through (anthropological or any other) discourse.*
>
> *Due to the self-reflexive nature of discourse, it remains impossible to engage directly with referents ('the world out there') All we do is allow our texts to engage in an intertextual dialogue with one another. Meaning always remains deferred. The referent always remains radically other.*

[126] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo,* Penguin 1950
[127] Moore, *Lovebite*, p12.
[128] Moore, *Lovbite*, p 21.
[129] *Fifth Estate,* Winter 1992, p 27.

## Not My Project

Later Moore declared the need to try to change this 'world out there':

> *Anarcho-primitivists need to develop communities of resistance ... These need to act as bases for action (particularly direct action) but also as sites for the creation of new ways of thinking, behaving, communicating, being ...*
>
> Primitivist Primer (1996)

In his later interview[130] he declares the Primitivism label restrictive: "In the *Primer*, I said that Primitivism is merely a convenient label. But for me anyway, it has lost its convenience." Specifically asked about the literalness of the return, Moore disavowed this aim. "In fact I am not interested in a 'return' to anything." The future anti-civilization anarchist society will be *sui generis*, (without precedent) Over the issue of his Postmodernism, Moore offers more than a hint with his advocacy of linguistic relativism: "It is a truism that different languages produce different realities." Asked about negative aspects of primitive tribes, for example cannibalism, Moore denied the possibility of return "as most people seem to think that primitivism means a desire to return to an idyllic version of primitive life, and this is not my project at all, I don't identify myself in this way. As a result, I don't feel the need to defend the practices of non civilised people."

[130] www.primitivism.com

# 6. Some Legitimate and Illegitimate Criticisms of Primitivism

Some criticisms of Primtivism have been justified, while others have not. This section seeks to take a look at both of these, and while doing so, to continue to place Primitivism within its wider context.

## Manichean

Primitivist doctrine inhabits a Manichean, dualistic universe. Idealists look at the Cartesian gulf between mind and matter, and despair of ever bridging the two, so they declare it is all mind. Materialists take the opposite line — there is only matter. Similarly with Primitivism; on the one hand we have the Deep Ecology vision of nature as a network of interlocking homeostatic mechanisms, yes; but also to be valued for itself, revered, and ultimately to be merged with in some language-less, static, primal unity, or some form of biocentric spirituality.[1] On the other hand, Primitivists depict civilization as a unity, the Unabomber's vision of it as an interlocking entity, Ellul, Perlman's Leviathan, this domain of material things, pollution, Postmodern vacuity and shallow ephemeral culture of consumption; a mesh of vicious circles. the Primitivists' Manichean world pits good nature against the evil technological-industrial-civilization.

## Nature Good — Technology Bad

These beliefs might be challenged as false descriptions of technology or nature. Technology is not an interlocking whole, but has many aspects and facets. Some of these are beneficial, some harmful. The Primitivist only sees the harmful, and refuses to acknowledge the beneficial aspects of technology (example: hospital operations to remove kidney stones), and thus is guilty of proof by selective example. The reason *why* a particular factory pollutes, the rain forest is cut down, or thousands of motorists clog up the trunk roads during the morning rush hour has to do with capitalism, yes,

[1] The concept of Gaia springs to mind here; though some Primitivists would probably disavow the term as being loaded with mystical baggage, there is something of Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis in their thinking, the hope that nature would somehow hit back against humanity for all its crimes; set this alongside the hope of industrial collapse, eg the Millennium Bug.

even multinational corporations, but it also has to do with social organisation, cultural arrogance and the multiplicity of small, particular decisions made by large numbers of people. To claim that 'technology is not neutral' is to indulge in metaphysics. So, one criticism of Primitivism might be to reject this Manichean, dualistic world view as untenable.

## False Accusations of Eco-Malthusianism

> *Some people argue population reduction wouldn't be necessary; others argue that it would on ecological grounds and or to sustain the kind of lifeways envisaged by anarcho-primitivists. George Bradford, in 'How Deep Is Deep Ecology?' argues that women's control over reproduction would lead to a fall in population ...*
>
> *Ignore the weird fantasies spread by some commentators hostile to anarcho-primitivism who suggest that the population levels envisaged by anarcho-primitivists would have to be achieved by mass die offs or nazi-style death camps. These are just smear tactics. The commitment of anarcho-primitivists to the abolition of all power relations, including the state with all its administrative and military apparatus, and [repudiation] of any kind of party or organization, means that such orchestrated slaughter remains an impossibility as well as just plain horrendous.*
>
> John Moore 'Primitivist Primer'

## Green Apocalypse

As an example of the false accusation of eco-Malthusianism levelled against Primitivism, we must turn to the Stewart Home / Fabian Thompset *Green Apocalypse* booklet[2] In this context, the dispute centres around the use made of George Bradford's critique of Malthusianism in a *Green Anarchist* editorial. This core text shows that the eco-Malthusianism of William R Catton[3] is criticised. In Bradford's 'How Deep is Deep Ecology?' Malthus' argument is described as "essentially circular"[4] Against Foreman and Devall: "regarding starvation in Ethiopia that 'the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve.' is repudiated, "Giving aid would of course spur the Malthusian cycle" is condemned as "Malthusian brutality couched in the terms of humanitarian concern." (p 33). Lower down, Foreman's views are described as 'obscene', he should be 'ashamed' (p 34). On starvation

[2] *Green Apocalypse*, Unpopular Books, London 1995

[3] William R Catton, *Overshoot The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*, Urbana, USA, 1980.

[4] George Bradford, *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?* Times Change Press, Ojai, California, USA 1989, p 16.

in Africa — "In Chad an increase in cotton production went hand in hand with mass hunger ... If people were starving, it was not for lack of cotton." (p 42) He dismisses eco-Malthusianism thus: "In such a case 'theory' is nothing but mean spirited ideology with fascist implications." (p 47) I have quoted from the Bradford book to show how US Primitivism rejects Malthusianism, and this rejection is also shared by John Moore, as shown by the quotation at the head of this section.

# Bad Faith

GA had paraphrased this material in response to earlier Neoist smears, as "When we discussed population in *GA*28, we argued current population levels aren't a problem, but if they were, women's control over their own fertility would sort it — well eco-fascist, eh?"[5] That issue of the magazine itself stated: "We must repudiate simple-minded Malthusian myths." Arguing in bad faith, using selective quotations to 'prove' conclusions which the author[s] knew to be false, the Neoist piece declared: "One of the issues we will address in this present text is the extent to which GA has created a rhetorical shield out of Bradford's arguments, behind which they can continue to propagate a number of the delusions he attacks."[6] It is not at all clear, however, whether at this stage the pseudonymous authors of this piece were truly aware of Primitivism and its implications, sneering at the 1991 *GA*29 editorial which declared "we are now free to promote a more pro-Situ, primitivist perspective" after the departure of Richard Hunt; and going on to attack John Moore thus: "Beneath this is a more sophisticated piece of garbage by-lined to John Moore (a lecturer in the School of Creative, Cultural and Social Studies at Thames Valley University) about so called 'anarcho-primitivism' (are there any anarchist doctrines that aren't thoroughly primitive in their failure to unite theory and practice?)"[7] This is an example of the type of attack made against Primitivism, an approach which does nobody any favours because it is based on misrepresentation.

# Black Flag

The UK anarcho-leftist magazine *Black Flag* published an attack on Primitivism, 'Dancing With The Devil'[8] which, as its title suggests, demonises the ideology. In so doing, it viciously misrepresents Primitivism, and tangles it together with other issues. *Black Flag* mistakenly interprets Primitivism as a single entity. As with the Home attack examined above, this mean-spirited indiscriminate approach does not help

[5] editorial *GA*38, Summer 1995, p 21.
[6] *Green Apocalypse*, p 1.
[7] *Green Apocalypse*, p6.
[8] Anon, 'Dancing With The Devil' *Black Flag*, 217, 1999, p 33 ff

*Black Flag*, nor does it help Primitivists come to a better understanding of their ideas. Rather, it enables Primitivists to continue portraying themselves as a beleaguered and maligned minority. A better approach would be to attempt to engage with them in fair and open debate. If Primitivism is wrong, this fact would come out through such a process. The Black Flag misrepresentation is a pity, because putting the abuse and sectarian propaganda aside, some of their criticism is not without merit.

## Malthusian Coercion

Clearly influenced by 'Green Apocalypse', *Black Flag* says "The logic of primitivism leads its proponents ultimately into the camp of those who would advocate 'Long Live Death'." Although Black Flag disavows the claim that *GA* is fascist, it goes on to adopt the guilt by association approach, linking *GA* with the fascist bag bomber. The article follows a similar line to the 'Green Apocalypse' book over population. "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."[9] and accuses Primitivists of being a form of 'Eco-Vanguardism', seeking to use coercion, Rousseau style "to force people to be free." despite such methods being repudiated by Primitivists, for example in John Moore's *Primitivist Primer*.

## Class Dogma Asserted

*Black Flag's* analysis is driven by the class dogma. "Class is the fundamental issue of our time."[10] Only the working class is potentially an agent of social change. With this in mind, their view of Primitivism is massively distorted, because it is viewed through this 'class only' lens. "The primitivist project rejects all notions of positive agency, of a human subject attempting to change the world, as 're-ifying' — alienative." It claims Primitivists reject all positive examples of resistance, but supposedly embrace destructive actions because they are 'de-civilizing'. This *Black Flag* claim that Primitivists reject all notions of positive agency is the most interesting part of what they have to say, although it is only true if one accepts their definition of positive (which equals 'working class') *Black Flag* claims that Primitivists have no capacity to change things because they believe ultimately all action expresses forms of power. Power is everywhere and all corrupting. Such an analysis owes a great deal to Michel Foucault, far more than to Zerzan or to John Moore; though aspects of both these thinkers' work defer to Foucault (another aspect of their Postmodernism) It would not be politic though, for *Black Flag* to attack po-mo. Yet if they have an objection to this belief, this is where they should take it up.

[9] *Black Flag* 217, p34.
[10] *Black Flag* 217, p 34

## Moore Mangled

The proof of the previous paragraph can been seen in their treatment of Moore. For *Black Flag*, John Moore is seen as theoretically bankrupt over his article 'Maximalist Anarchism — Anarchist Maximalism'[11] for claiming that political power is everywhere and all corrupting. *Black Flag* claimed that as two aspects of the same power, Moore confused resistance with oppression: "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."[12] Moore's approach is said to be linked with the 'deconstructive agenda of postmodernism' and he is dismissed — "What we are left with is bourgeois individualism dressed up as freedom."

## Misrepresentation

The *Black Flag* analysis of Moore's article is deeply misrepresentational. They claim that Moore states that future possibilities are closed off, that he represents a type of nihilistic hopelessness, and is anti-community. This characterisation is false. Though it has faults, Moore here is much better than the *Black Flag* pastiche offered. Moore asserts passion and irrationality over Enlightenment reason, and calls for a multi-faceted assault on the power complex: "Power, in all its overt and subtle forms must be rooted out if life is to become free."[13] What kind of psychological processes create anarchists? Here, art can be used: "In light of the above discussion of psychological issues, it becomes apparent that maximalism needs to make use of the discourses and practices of the arts, if it is to reach out and communicate with people." Minimalist anarchism, liberal, reformist, compromised, says 'If only...' but far from closing off future possibilities, maximalist anarchism says 'What if?'

## Zerzan

Here, *Black Flag* mistakenly treats Primitivism as a unitary body of doctrine, passing over the fact that Moore advocates art, while John Zerzan rejects it. Borrowing largely from the analysis made by Brian Morris, in *AJODA*[14] *Black Flag* is softer on Zerzan than Moore, but his position still leads to despair. There is no way forwards. "All those products of the human creative imagination ... are viewed negatively by Zerzan — in a monolithic sense." In the *Black Flag* view of Primitivism: "We can't stand where we are — we can't go forward because power is everywhere and human

[11] John Moore, 'Maximalist Anarchism — Anarchist Maximalism', *Green Anarchist* 54 / 55, Spring 1999, p 13.

[12] *Black Flag*, 217, p 34.

[13] *GA* 54/55, p 13.

[14] Brian Morris, *Anarchy A Journal of Desire Armed*, 45, USA, Spring Summer 1998.

agency is ultimately reifying." Primitivism is a dead end. This may be a true conclusion, but it is argued from defective analysis. *Black Flag's* brief examination of Zerzan's theories of reification is one feature of their shallow analysis; their engagement with Primitivism in its wider aspects is fundamentally superficial, driven by sectarianism, not any wish to seek the truth.

## Swamp Fever

We move from considering Britain's *Black Flag,* to the USA. David Watson's 1997 article, Swamp Fever,[15] has been credited with marking the start of the decline of US Primitivism. "While many people criticised it at the time, it may have had a much bigger impact than anyone would have expected."[16] The first part of the article deals with the Neoists' *Green Apocalypse* book, examined above. Watson describes the Neoist Alliance as "an amalgam of aesthetic vanguardism and ultra-leftist swagger." Neoist accusations of eco-fascism against *GA* are not proven. "Such is the quality of the Neoist accusations throughout: exaggeration, obfuscation, indignation and bluff." Neoist intentions are "transparently malicious" Watson dismisses them with "in fact the crux of the Neoist argument is simply a barren, unexamined defence of industrialism and mass technics."[17]

## Watson Contra Moore

Watson is also critical of *GA* for its alleged unreflective emphasis on activity over theory, and for supporting the Unabomber. We need to develop a constructive politics of solidarity, re-examining our ideas in the light of reality, as well as theory. Yet it is in the middle section of the essay where Primitivism itself is re-examined. Mostly, Watson's intention here is sectarian, to trash John Moore, particularly over his *Transgressions* essay, but also for having the temerity to produce the *Primitivist Primer.* The thrust of Watson's refutation is two-fold. The first jab is that Moore seems to believe there was a unitary, coherent consciously Primitivist school (or group), which was founded in Detroit; that various writers came together in the pages of *Fifth Estate* magazine, and cross fertilized ideas between each other. This Watson denies, even laughs at, on the grounds that he was there, while Moore was not. There was never a coherent group, never a Primitivist praxis. The people Moore cites were not part of a unified project, had little in common and were a pretty disparate bunch, really. The second cut Watson makes against Moore is that he falsely believes 'Primitivism' to be a unitary ideology. (If this second is true, the first part of his argument against Moore

[15] David Watson, Fifth Estate, Vol 32, Autumn 1997, pp 15 ff

[16] John Filiss, 12th December 2001 at www.primitivism.com

[17] David Watson, 'Swamp Fever', *op cit*, p 16.

would seem to follow — no coherent set of beliefs, no group) The 'Primitivist Primer' "borders on an attempt to codify a primitivist taxonomy."[18] It isn't like that, Watson stipulates, *Fifth Estate* is not an organization or a political tendency, and claims no special insight. The only -ist that Fredy Perlman identified with is 'cellist'[19]

## Jumping Off The Ship of Theseus

These kinds of denial bring with them certain political consequences, for the people who think of themselves as Primitivists. The denial of the existence of a group in Detroit, in Watson's polemic against Moore is at base nothing but a dispute over words; (it is a trivial argument over when is a group not a group?) For the magazine *Fifth Estate* undoubtedly existed, and there must have been some degree of common belief (however slight) for the people to come together and work. It is the nature of radical politics that people involved do not necessarily believe the same things, and soon drift apart again, while others join in and continue along the same or a similar path. Doubtless Watson tells the truth about the divergent nature of these writers, but this is not the whole picture, for the *Fifth Estate* is read outside the precincts of Detroit, yea even unto as far away as Kingston Upon Thames. The ideas contained within it influence the thinking of others. Watson rightly reminds us that Primitivism is not all one thing, that there are many different strands, including the 'Back to the Stone Age' Earth Firsters!, neo-Luddites, etc etc. It is clear though, that Moore knows this. Watson himself demonstrates the fissiparous character of Primitivism when he expresses disdain for the Zerzanians, opposing the rejection of the totality of technology as "empty theoretical bravado". Watson asserts the distinction between tools, technology and technics. Similarly he disparages the Unabomber's call to heighten social stresses, and the goal of working to destroy technological-industrial civilization.[20]

## Trashing The Raft

> *However sympathetic he may be to this project, Moore's interpretation of Detroit is absurdly spectacularised ...*[21]

Whenever we invent or make a classification, we need to ask, did I choose to lump these disparate objects together, arbitrarily, or do they really have something in common? 'Primitivism' as acknowledged in the earlier part of this booklet is a very loose thing. If it is a 'family resemblance concept' at all, it is of a most dysfunctional family. This problem comes with the territory, and we have to live with it, if we are to try to

[18] Watson, 'Swamp Fever', p 18.
[19] Lorraine Perlman, Having Little, Being Much, B & R, Detroit, 1989, p 96.
[20] Watson, 'Swamp Fever', p 19, Unabomber sections 181 and 182.
[21] Watson, 'Swamp Fever', p 18

make sense of Primitivism. We can think about sophistical problems like the 'Ship of Theseus', the 'Argument of the Beard' or Zeno's Arrow Paradox; which pose questions about where do we draw boundaries, about identity, about slides between white into black through multifarious shades of grey. Here, in his denial that Primitivism is a homogeneous tendency, implicitly Watson employed these types of problems as the basis of a rhetorical tactic to diss John Moore; perversely, the effect may have back-fired, and caused his own readers to question the coherence (both logical and ideological) of each of their own 101 varieties of Primitivism. For, if there was no coherent group in Detroit, no 'primitivism' as such, nothing to really hold them together; no ship, but just a loose conglomeration of broken driftwood sticks bobbing haphazardly mid ocean, such a thought must have had a strongly demoralising effect. After all, under Primitivist thinking, *origins are all important*. The origins of Primitivism were in Detroit. No origins — ergo — no Primitivism. Phouf! it all disappears is a cloud of spent ooofle dust.

## Eternal Problem

It is problematic, for Primitivists, to claim they have a coherent ideology, as shown above in Part 5. To make such a claim is to invite criticism that Primitivism is a racket, as a gang in the Camatte sense. Watson is well aware of this problem, he makes specific reference to it.[22] This awareness drives much of his critique of Moore. Primitivism is not, and never could be a movement. It is an eternal paradox with this kind of theoretical material. Once it is set down, once it becomes something fixed, determinate, it ossifies, it becomes Ideology. So, it can only remain elusive, it cannot become coherent. In so far as such a body of thinking coagulates, it will attract followers. Then, it becomes a movement, but as soon as it does, it must be attacked and repudiated. Thus, revolutionary theory must always remain ephemeral, almost addressing itself, and no one else. As such, its effect must remain marginal. Watson sees that Primitivism has passed its shelf life. The raft has floundered on the reef of solipsism, time to jump off. "Primitivism is less and less a nuanced orientation ..." (oh so there was something there then, an 'orientation' ?) "... and more and more a fool's paradise."[23]

## Jason McQuinn

The article by Jason McQuinn, *Why I am Not A Primitivist*'[24] continues the turning away from Primitivism seen in the USA. McQuinn, one of the editors of *AJODA*,

[22] Watson, 'Swamp Fever', p 19.

[23] Watson, 'Swamp Fever', p 19

[24] Jason McQuinn 'Why I am Not A Primitivist,' *Anarchy, A Journal of Desire Armed*, (=AJODA) Spring / Summer 2001

the house journal of the Zerzanian wing of US Primitivism, marks out the various strands of Primitivism; *Fifth Estate* under Perlman / Watson, Zerzan, and the Earth First! Deep Ecology strands. As with Watson, these are seen as incompatible, there are gaps between them, they preach different things. Unfortunately, Primitivism has become an ideology. "an idealised, hypostatized vision of primal societies tends to irresistibly displace the essential centrality of critical self-theory." Ideology falsifies the revolutionary impulse. McQuinn asks us to examine present day society and present alienation. The criticism of civilization, progress and technology are necessary, but we really need to start from where we are today. Hard-line Primitivism will bring vast social upheaval, and risks the continuation of the survival of our species. (Nuclear or biological accidents?) "Primitivism, at least in this form, is never likely to command the support of more than a relatively small milieu of marginal malcontents." McQuinn does not seem to say that this factor, what I term the 'the politics of bloody-mindedness' makes it even less attractive, though this thought is almost certainly there. We need to start to work against the worst aspects of civilization, and pick our way downwards from there. It needs a new name. "I doubt that we would do worse than 'Primitivism'." Instead, McQuinn opts for anarchism. The critique of civilization is here to stay. In this, his article contains a lot of good sense, and is a realistic appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of Primitivism. Like Watson, McQuinn knows that we need a social dimension. Does his article represent a first step towards this, is it merely a plea for a change in window dressing, or the first real howl of anguish from one who sees that the Primitivist ideology is dying?

# The Primitivist Assault on Ethics

> *"A Self Defeating isolation"*
>
> Zerzan

In defending the actions of the Unabomber, John Zerzan makes an appeal to ethics: "The concept of justice should not be overlooked in considering the Unabomber phenomenon. In fact, except for his targets, when have the many little Eichmanns who are preparing the Brave New World ever been called to account? Where is any elementary personal responsibility when the planners of our daily and global death march act with complete impunity?"[25] Cutting against the voice of his master, Paul Rogers, by contrast, criticising religion and philosophy declares ethics to be merely a method of manipulating people. "Setting ethical or other tenets to live by in this way is just another means of continuing hierarchical control and alienation. "[26]

[25] John Zerzan 'Whose Unabomber?' GA 40/41, p 22

[26] Paul Rogers, article for *Bark* Magazine USA, dated 10th November 2000.

## Ought

There are three routes by which such a ruling might be criticised: first by observing its implied premiss that one *ought* not to try to control other people, that this is wrong. As such, the statement returns to the ethical. The second way of refuting this is a matter of observing facts about ethics. The ethical is not a matter of one party or side arbitrarily imposing its will over the other, but a quality or property which we find or do not find in the relationship between them. Ethics is something present in their actions and choices, but it is public. Right and wrong remain despite the efforts of dictators, totalitarians or theorists to abolish or distort them. The third refutation calls on us to examine the consequences of holding this belief for Primitivism. Rejecting the ethical means that Primitivists are rendered incapable of criticising the actions of earth rapist company directors, or of making value judgements such as "superficial faith in specialization and technical progress is increasingly seen as ludicrous."[27] or criticise the "cowardice" and "dishonesty" of writers who push technology.[28] In repudiating or abandoning or denigrating ethics, not only are Primitivists deprived of the means of making such an external critique of society, economics, technology; but just as importantly, they deprive themselves of a way of evaluating their own actions and beliefs.

## The Ego and Its Own

Taking Nietzschean Perspectivism (itself Postmodern orthodoxy) a stage further, we find the Stirnerite tendency within Primitivism in Zerzan's rejection of community: "The refusal of community might be termed a self-defeating isolation but it appears preferable, healthier, than declaring our allegiance to the daily fabric of an increasingly self-destructive world."[29] — note the value judgements like — 'healthier', "preferable', and 'increasingly self -destructive'.) Instead, the Primitivists have bought into the Postmodern social atomisation thesis big-time, taken it to its end point, and have applied it to the social form of their own revolution. John Filiss, for example, responding to ethical criticism of Rogers/Kintz $3750 from *Penthouse*, denies an invocation of the ethical: "You seem to imagine some kind of commonality of interest that doesn't exist."[30]

[27] Zerzan on *Technology*, GA42.

[28] Don't just take my word for it. Go through Primitivist writings yourself and count up the evaluative terms used.

[29] Zerzan, 'Community', GA 52, Summer 1998, p 8.

[30] email from John Filiss, dated December 2001.

## Why Would Anybody Want to Join?

This is precisely the point. We do not have, with Primitivism, any sense of community. For if ethics is to be rejected, what is to stop me ripping you off, doing you down, exploiting you? How will you criticise my actions? There is no call to be honest with each other, no ethical capacity to condemn wrongdoing. Why would any prospective member of such a movement[31] be so stupid as to join? Under these terms? Primitivists do not offer any genuine sense of community, they are merely an expression of po-mo alienation, the most alienated of all alienated forms. Primitivism, *sans* morality, is essentially a mass of Stirnerite little shits, each pushing the other out of the way to be the King or the Queen of the primeval midden. In this, praxis, Primitivist deeds become their own, best, refutation.

## Cheap Shots

> (Unabomber section 200) ... *if the revolutionaries permit themselves to have any other goal than the destruction of technology, they will be tempted to use technology as a tool for reaching that other goal. If they give in to that temptation, they will fall right back into the technological trap, because modern technology is a unified, tightly organized system ...*
>
> *(s 202) It would be hopeless for revolutionaries to try to attack the system without using* ***some*** *modern technology.*

There are two basic common objections to Primitivism. The first is the accusation that Primitivists are hypocrites; that they condemn technology, but they also use mobile phones, cars, the internet. When American Primitivist John Zerzan came to London to speak, in August 2000, Michel Prigent barracked him with the question "Did you fly here?" It is a fair question. Primitivists do themselves no favours by sidestepping this issue. Some Primitivists point to the remarks about not wanting a *literal* return to the Palaeolithic, but this response is undermined by the Appeal to Anthropological Fact defence, in assertions that "this is the way humanity lived for millions of years." Spiritual Primitivists see nothing wrong in starting with the Stone Age as a pattern, but stress that they do not know, nor would they want to prescribe the shape of our ultimate destination. This is a 'no true Scotsman' move, such that any putative Primitivist utopia offered will be repudiated, and the definition of Primitivism redrawn. The question then has to be repeated; in what sense is what they want *primitive*? So the cycle repeats itself and the definition retreats, an infinite regress. The other type of Primitivist defence claims that we can only begin from where we are today; that the internet, mobile phones and transatlantic air flight exist and are there to be used. How can Section 200 and s 202 of the Unabomber Manifesto be reconciled?

[31] It is wrong to think of Primitivism as a 'movement' — a better term would be a 'stasis'.

## Cant

Frustratingly, these answers are pure sophistry. If Primitivists want their ideas to be taken seriously, they should start to live them out in practice, and stop eating the chocolates. In evading the question, in asserting they only seek a 'spiritual' or 'metaphysical' "return" Primitivists prove their fundamentally Postmodern posturing. They have had long enough to work it out. In refusing to give details of what they want, the Primitivists proclaim their radical meaningless.

## Zerzan's Use of Language To Criticise Language

The second common objection, a development of the first, objects to John Zerzan's use of language to criticise language. The standard defence of this is a variation of the 'we have to start from where we are now' reply. Paul Rogers defends Zerzan thus: "You do have to explain how homo sapiens' forebears managed to do perfectly well without symbolic culture for 500,000 + years and other animals managed to co-operate, communicate and reproduce their societies without it.[32] At base, the defence here is that because Zerzan is so enmeshed in Leviathan, so captivated by language, there is no other way to start. There is no way out. This fact ultimately demonstrates the totalitarian nature of the 'Empire of Signs', a defender of Primitivism will claim. We now need to look at Zerzan's critique of language.

## John Zerzan on Language

What is this so-called 'devastating' critique of language mounted by Zerzan? Unsurprisingly, it rests on the belief that without language the primitive experience was complete, unmediated. "the savage mind totalises" Zerzan quotes Levi-Strauss.[33] "Representation and uniformity begin with language, reminding us of Heidegger's insistence that something extraordinarily important has been forgotten by civilization.". Language itself is not neutral. Language divides up nature, imposes pre-ordained patterns on it; language is already well on the way to becoming Ideology. Language is all tied up with the domination of nature. "to name anything by a name is to win power over it," Zerzan quotes Spengler. Along with this comes the domination of other human beings — the earliest known writings are tax returns. "Words dilute and brutalize, words depersonalise, words make the uncommon common." according to Nietzsche. With language comes closure, that 'sticky symbolic net'. With language, we progressively move away from directly lived experience. Through its use of tenses, language puts us into time, divided up into past, present and future; the Biblical Fall is seen as a fall into

[32] Paul Rogers letter to Bark! magazine, 10th November 2000.

[33] John Zerzan, 'Language Origin and Meaning' in *Elements of Refusal*, Autonomedia, 1988.

time — the prologue of John's Gospel "In the beginning was the word..." Myths like the Tower of Babel follow from the Cro-Magnon unease with all this, a desire to return to an unmediated, wordless, non-linguistic condition. Citing E H Sturtevant, Zerzan tells us "voluntary communication, such as language, must have been invented for the purposes of lying or deceiving."

## Are You Saussure?

Where does this pre-occupation with language come from? Zerzan says that Roland Barthes declared language "absolutely terrorist". (Has George W Bush been told of this? Call out the B-52s to begin carpet bombing ...) Lacan tells us consciousness is structured as a language. Levi-Bruhl, Levy-Strauss, Kafka, Pinter, Derrida — "they have virtually renounced the project of extracting meaning from language". Towards the end of his *Language Origin and Meaning* essay, Zerzan sets out his intended programme: "Language, which at any given moment embodies the ideology of a particular culture, must be ended in order to abolish both categories of estrangement; a project of some considerable dimensions let us say." Yet still the Zerzanian articles and books keep on churning out.

## Humpty Dumpty

> *When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.*
>
> 'Through the Looking Glass', Chapter 6

In defending his master, Paul Rogers writes: "You know as well as the rest of us that Saussure said the relationship between signifiers and signifieds was arbitrary."[34] (Yes, but what does that tell us about *meaning*?) Zerzan, for his part, quotes Mallarme — "Who is speaking? Language is speaking." Zerzan's attack on language is clearly related to Postmodernism. Meaning is subordinate to language. It is like a Russian Doll, with one thing inside another inside another. Linguistics studied particular languages, and moved on to compare the grammar and structure of different languages. Now linguistics wishes to take its intellectual activity a stage further, and demands to study the form or structure of *language* itself. Something is wrong here. Language is in no such position to demand, study, move, do anything. Language is not a conscious entity. In this false type of thinking, there has been an unwarranted shift from the passive to the active. Talking and writing are activities which people do together, they are not something which is done *to* them. Language is a tool, like the network of roads in Britain. We can decide to drive from London to Birmingham say, and take certain roads to get

[34] Letter to Bark! magazine, USA, 10th November 2000

there. This is our choice — we could go to Manchester instead, or stay at home today. Zerzan's ideas about language assume the road system to be a living thing, deciding the destinations and routes for us. This is a false description of the situation. The structures of language are facts, but if people want to, over time, they can change them. (Pull up the motorways and have cycle ways?) The same sort of thought can be applied to political structures or social organizations. If they are inadequate, we can work together to change them. The Zerzanian / Postmodern characterization of language as something, a living entity beyond all human actions and choices, is false. language does not have consciousness or a life of its own in its own right, separate from our activity.

## Ownership

There is another thinker who has many features in common with Zerzan, in his treatment of the topic of language. However, to introduce a note of mystery into this, I shall not tell you the name of this thinker until the end of this exposition. (If you don't want to know who it is, wait till the end before looking at the footnotes.) This mystery thinker was described not as a Primitivist, but as a 'Primalist'. Primalism is defined as a plea for the return to the truth of being. The Marx of the 1844 Paris Manuscripts (in his term *species-being*) was one, Freud, Levi-Strauss were others.[35] Now John Zerzan's analysis seeks to re-assert the primal, language-less condition. The mystery thinker regarded silence as primordial, and thought it could bring genuine transparency between one another.[36] Language, to Zerzan, was about ownership, to name something is to win power over it. This other thinker regarded language as owning, gathering together, taking possession, and used the term 'Propriation', ownership being thought of as the law. "We can be those listeners only if we belong to the saying."[37] Language is "an instrument of domination over beings"[38] Zerzan claimed that to name something is to win power over it, and cited the example of Adam naming the animals. This second writer similarly, prompting a critic to describe his approach as a secularization of the Adamic Fall. Zerzan writes of a fall into time, or into symbolization. Our mystery writer considers temporality as primordial, and is very critical of the alienated surrender of identity to the mass-man, the 'they', in terms similar to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, saying "Everyone is the other and no one is himself."[39] Temporality is a Fall to our unnamed Primalist, we tell ourselves a kind of story, history about the process

[35] George Steiner, *Heidegger*, Harvester, Sussex, 1978, p143.

[36] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, section 34, tr Maquarrie, Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, p 208

[37] Heidegger, 'The Way To Language', in *Basic Writings* ed David Farrer Krell, Routledge, 1978 p 413. (=WTL)

[38] Heidegger 'Letter on Humanism' *Basic Writings* p 223.

[39] Heidegger, *Being and Time* I.4 s 27, p 165.

of life, immersed in this alienated, swirling pageant, but this is to no avail, "It becomes a way of painfully detaching oneself from the falling publicness of the 'today'."[40]

## Language as Active

Zerzan tells us that language is not neutral, but imposes itself. He compared it to ideology. Our mystery thinker refers to language's "prevailing imprinting power". Just as with Ideology — 'You don't have ideas, ideas have you', so too with our second man, who thinks the same regarding thinking. "The fact that it has been showing itself in the light of ideas ever since the time of Plato, Plato did not bring about. The thinker only responded to what addressed itself to him."[41] Zerzan thinks of language as an active entity, in just the same way as the second thinker, who variously describes language as 'bestowing', 'granting', and quotes Novalis (1772–1801) who has language speaking to itself. Language cannot be attributed, exclusively or definitively, to human action.[42] Similarly with technology, this is "no merely human doing."[43] Man did not invent language.[44] Zerzan quotes Mallarme "Who is speaking? Language is speaking", our second thinker likewise — "We hear language speaking.", "Nevertheless it is language that speaks."[45]

## Concealment

Zerzan is critical of the closure and limitations of language. So to is the mystery thinker, who also regards the essence of language to be about concealment. What is not said is as important as what is said. "on this way, which pertains to the essence of language, what is peculiar to language conceals itself."[46] "What is spoken derives in manifold ways from the unspoken."[47] As with the Saussure quote above, our mystery thinker also believes that the relationship between the sign and signified is merely conventional[48] Language is criticised for being transitory, and described as 'mummification'.

[40] *Being and Time*, section 76, p 449.
[41] WTL, p 323.
[42] WTL, p 410
[43] 'The Question Concerning Technology', tr Lovitt Harper and Row, NY, USA, 1977, p 19.
[44] Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr R Mannheim, Doubleday, 1961.
[45] WTL, p 411
[46] WTL, p 418
[47] WTL, p 407
[48] WTL, p 401

## Language as a Net

John Zerzan attacked language for dividing up nature. The unnamed thinker likewise is looking for some unifying field behind language. To him, language is a world. He quotes Humboldt "Precisely what I am striving for is a conception of the world in its individuality and totality."[49] He describes language as being like ploughing the earth, making a mark across it, or like a snow path.[50] and introduces the term 'rift-design' as in tearing, marking or gouging something. One of the most important images Zerzan used about language was the net, with its connotations of entrapment, snaring. All meaning was linguistic, the child could not close the door to reading once it was open. Similarly with our mystery second thinker, language was "a pre-determined realm", 'a weft' which "compresses, tightens and thus obstructs any straightforward view into its mesh."[51]

## Consciousness, Loss

Citing Lacan, Zerzan regarded consciousness as being structured like a language. Our second thinker said "the essence of man consists in language." "Man shows himself as the entity which talks."[52] To Zerzan, language is identified with loss, so too with our Primalist, who now sees speech reduced down to mere technique, the mechanical. For him, language is understood as "the house of the truth of Being".[53] Who is the mystery thinker, who in so many ways prefigures John Zerzan's critique of language? Step forwards Martin Heidegger, 'the Little Magician from Messkirch.'

Nietzsche writes of the new generation of philosophers and professors:

> *When he thinks of the haste and hurry now universal, of the increasing velocity of life, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, he almost thinks that what he is seeing are the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture. The waters of religion are ebbing away and leaving behind swamps or stagnant pools; the nations are again drawing away from one another in the most hostile fashion and long to tear one another to pieces. The sciences, pursued without any restraint and in a spirit of the blindest laissez faire, are shattering and dissolving all firmly held belief; the educated states and states are being swept along by a hugely contemptible money economy. The world has never been more worldly, never poorer in love and goodness. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or refuges in the midst of this turmoil of secularization; they themselves grow daily*

[49] WTL, p 405
[50] WTL, p 407
[51] WTL, p 399
[52] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I.5, s 34, p 208
[53] Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', (December 1946) *Basic Writings*, p 223.

*more restless, thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism.*

Nietzsche 'Schopenhauer as Educator' *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge U P, 1983, p 148

# Romanticism

Rousseau on cities: *Man is not made to live in such ant hills but in sparsely populated places. The closer people are packed together, the more they become corrupt. The breath of man is deadly to his fellows.*

*Emile* (1762)[54]

One of the strange things about Primitivists is their anger if critics suggest they have been influenced by Romanticism. Yet, it seems clear Primitivism *could* be a late flowering of Romanticism — it is an interesting hypothesis, worth following up.[55] "When I reach places where there is no trace of men I breathe freely, as if I were in a refuge where they could no longer pursue me."[56] Several other statements by Rousseau could be seen as Primitivist, in *Emile*, and the anti-domestication material in his *Discourse on Inequality.* (1754) It is also possible to find something of these themes in William Blake. There are several theories as to why Primitivists should react so sharply to the suggestion of this link to Romanticism. The first is the obvious view that Romanticism is in a dialectical relationship with the Industrial Revolution, or with the Enlightenment / Reason.[57] Thus, Primitivism as Romanticism may be understood in a negative, reactive, passive sense. The second theory relates to the concept of the 'Noble Savage'. The idolization of the Noble Savage is a reaction to some particular episode of contact between two cultures. Homer, Pliny and Xenophon are said to have idealised the Arcadians. Horace, Virgil and Ovid the Scythians. More recently, Dryden uses the concept of the Noble Savage in his 'Conquest of Grenada' (1672) Thomas Southerne and Aphra Behn also used it, as did Chateaubriand, James Fenimore Cooper, and Herman Melville.

The 'Noble Savage' concept is seen as bound up with colonialism and imperialism, and also as patronising towards native cultures, and thus for reasons of political correctness, the Primitivists wish to dissociate themselves from this. Yet, it would seem

[54] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (1762) Ch 7, tr Barbara Foxley, Allen Lane, London 1991, p181

[55] In my earlier book 'Into the 1990s With Green Anarchist' (1996) I wrote on Rousseau's experience of going into the forest near Motiers, thinking he was all alone, and then being irritated to find that nearby was a stocking mill. See *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782) tr Peter France, Penguin, London, 1979. (Seventh Walk)

[56] Rousseau, *Reveries*, op cit p 117.

[57] The Moore / Morris correspondence on the Enlightenment come to mind here, eg *GA*56, 57/58, 59, 60.

to be a useful starting point from which the Primitivists' idealization of primitive cultures could be analysed. I believe that this could be a fruitful area of research for a future attack on Primitivism which would cut right to the core of their belief system. The third theory about Primitivists' rejection of Romanticism could refer to Rousseau himself, either as a liberal thinker (the Social Contract eg) or as connected to totalitarianism, both of which are to be condemned. Connected with this, related to origins, if Primitivists found themselves lodged in the 1760s, this would rather get in the way of their putative return to the Palaeolithic. All of these theories have some merit, but they ultimately fail if the Romantic period is looked on in a positive way, rather than as a negative.

## The Darker Side of Romanticism: Spengler, Junger and Heidegger

> On the Unabomber Manifesto: *Schwartz found professors who would loftily attest to the unoriginality of fundamental questioning of society, as if anything like that goes on in classrooms. Ellul, Junger and others with a negative view of technology are far from old hat; they are unknown, not a part of accepted, respected discourse. The cowardice and dishonesty typical of professors and journalists could hardly be more clearly represented.*
> 'Whose Unabomber?'[58]
>
> *Those who still say that technology is 'neutral', 'merely a tool' have not yet begun to consider what is involved. Junger, Adorno and Horkheimer, Ellul and a few others over the past decades — not to mention the crushing, all but unavoidable truth of technology in its global and personal toll — have led to a deeper approach to the topic.*
>
> John Zerzan, 'Future Primitive'[59]
>
> *Martin Heidegger, considered by some the most original and deep thinker of this century, saw the individual becoming only so much raw material for the limitless expansion of industrial technology. Incredibly, his solution was to find in the Nazi movement the essential encounter between global technology and modern man.*
>
> Future Primitive[60]
>
> *The bizarre case of Heidegger should be a reminder to all that good intentions can go wildly astray without a willingness to face technology and its*

[58] Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous, GA40/41, Spring 1996, p21.
[59] John Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, (1994) p 138
[60] *Future Primitive*, p 140

*systematic nature as part of practical social reality. Heidegger feared the political consequences of really looking at technology critically; his apolitical theorising thus constituted a part of the most monstrous development of modernity, despite his intention.*

Future Primitive[61]

*According to Jean Luc Nancy, the main thing representational thought represents is its limit. Heidegger and Wittgenstein, possibly the most original of 20$^{th}$ century thinkers, ended up disclaiming philosophy along these lines.*

John Zerzan, That Thing We Do[62]

*Art is the other early objectification of culture, which is what makes it into a separate activity and gives it reality. Art is also a quasi-utopian promise of happiness, always broken. The betrayal resides largely in the reification. 'To be a work of art means to set up a world,' according to Heidegger, but this counter world is powerless against the rest of the objectified world of which it remains a part.*

That Thing We Do[63]

## Caution Needed

It is necessary to examine the Spengler, Junger and Heidegger axis, and its relationship to Primitivism. Here, a note of caution is needed. This area has offered criticism, as well as adulation of technology. Some of its themes and approaches have influenced Primitivism. The influence of the axis on National Socialism is well known. However, it would be completely wrong to adopt a guilt by association dismissal of Primitivism from this, to simplistically equate Primitivists with the Nazis. The question needs closer examination.

## Industrialization

First: The historical context. European Nineteenth Century industrialization brought severe social tensions, with many moving from the countryside to the cities. Culturally, the Enlightenment and Napoleonic era established another break. The middle classes came to be powerful, politically. In Germany, this was compounded with Bismarck's unification. 'Manchesterism' — free market liberalism, and technology swept all before it. The Willhelmine bourgeoisie came to embody this mediocrity. The

[61] *Future Primitive*, p 140.
[62] John Zerzan, 'That Thing We Do', GA 51, Spring 1998, p 14
[63] John Zerzan, 'That Thing We Do', GA51, p 15.

creeds of Positivism, or Marxism replaced the church. Nietzsche declared God dead, but the clay footed idols offered in replacement were unsatisfactory substitutes.

## Crawling With Worms

"Did it not crawl with spiritual vermin as with worms? Did it not ferment and stink of the decaying matter of civilization?"
Thomas Mann[64]

The rot really got going with the First World War. At first, there was a kind of exhilaration, intoxication with it. German academics, even including the theologian, Adolf von Harnack, published a declaration supporting the war. Enter Ernst Junger, a dandified dilettante, who found a sort of catharsis in his war experience — the shells, the machine guns, the aircraft, tanks, the battle, advancing with the troops behind the clouds of poisonous gas. Junger read Holderlin, with his talk of war as 'the creator of all great things', of its danger, but also of its saving power. He read Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "You say that it is the good cause that hallows even war? I tell you, it is the good war that hallows every cause."[65] and regarded the present condition of man as something to be overcome. For Junger, war was like a wheel spinning inside an axle, like a turbine filled with blood, or a father. (!) What held this together was the comradeship between the soldiers, their common experience of battle, the *Fronterlebnis.* "There in combat, the individual is like a raging storm, the tossing sea and the roaring thunder. He has melted into everything."[66] In this, the individual is submerged, rather in the same way as described by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents.* The soldiers face each other in battle, and find an 'inner experience', a primordial condition. All important to Junger's vision here, was technology, the whole melded together, a single purpose, a 'total-mobilization' (*totale mobilmachung*) After the war, in the early 1930s, Junger published books of photographs, 'The Dangerous Moment', 'The Transformed World', showing pictures of machine shops, factories, streets, neon signs, clocks, racing cars, sports figures breaking records. A type of distancing effect was created, the shock-tactics bringing acceptance of this alienation.

## Pessimism

The sense of optimism could not last, and with the defeat of 1918 and the humiliation of Versailles, Junger and other right wing thinkers wished for the clearing away of the Weimar Republic. Here, the 'Juni Klub', which met at Motzstrass 22, in Berlin,

[64] Thomas Mann, quoted in Fritz Stern *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, U of Californa Press, 1961, pp205-6

[65] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Hollingdale tr, Penguin, 1961, p 74.

[66] Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel*, 1920, p 74..

became an important meeting point between moneyed industrialists, and rightist writers.[67] counting such luminaries as Heinrich Bruning, (later Chancellor) Otto Strasser, and Moeller Van Den Bruck among its members. Cultural pessimism after the defeat set in, and became fashionable. Groups of former soldiers tried to recreate the *Fronterlebnis*. The failed November 9$^{th}$ Revolution, which resulted in the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, deepened the sense of decay and crisis. Junger aligned himself with these 'Stahlheim' groups, commenting that the 'true soldier is not merely concerned with memories of war, but rather applying the spirit and meaning of these memories to the future.[68] As part of this, *Sinnlosigkeit*, fate, as with the contingency of life at the front (where would the next shell land?) loomed large and brooding.

## Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss

Part of this included the sense that technology was out of control. At first this was exhilarating, but this feeling palled. Oswald Spengler writes of a 'Faustian World Feeling' growing out of this industrialism. Junger regarded the technicians as a new priesthood. At the front, Junger felt a sense of magical, hidden but nevertheless real forces underneath. This was linked with fate, but where would this sense, this feeling go in peacetime? — into the factories, into the big cities. The individual would be suppressed, absorbed into the wider whole.[69] Technologists, soldiers, specialists, workers eulogised in the photographs — formed the new elite; through which the sacred came to be expressed in collective gatherings. Junger called for this industrialization to be speeded up, the prospect of a return to nature was seen as a false hope.[70] On the other hand, Spengler, with his theme of decline, was critical of progress.

## Domestication

In a rather Freudian image, Junger depicted technology as a tower rising from the *Urwald,* the primal forest. WW1 had laid bare the basic barbarian animal self underneath. This was contrasted with the domesticated, bourgeois, civilized, artificial man. This was similar territory to that of Freud with his *Civilization and its Discontents* of around the same period. Taking the lead from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols,* where man is tamed by the church, Junger saw a similar (but secularized) process taking place within the Willhelmine bourgeois before, and in Weimar after the war. Man was domesticated, turned into a pet. At around the same time, influenced by Schopenhauer,

[67] Ernst Troeltsch, for example, considered the Juni Klub 'the sinister central link in an alliance of industrialists and writers' — Fritz Stern, *op cit*, p 232.

[68] quoted in Roger Woods, *Ernst Junger and the Nature of Political Commitment*, Heinz, Stuttgart, 1982, p 103.

[69] this is expressed in Junger's work between *Grosstadt und Land (*1926) and *Der Arbeiter*, (1932).

[70] Ernst Junger, *Der Arbeiter*, 1932, see Woods, *op cit*, pp 105–107.

Darwin and Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler also examined technology, declaring "the master of the world has become slave to the machine." Famously, Spengler uses the analogy of a tree; germinating, growing, blossoming, bearing fruit, reaching maturity, and then declining.[71] Technology is seen as a tyrant, violating nature and enslaving men[72]

## Decisionism

Much has been written on the question of Spengler and Junger's relationship to the genesis of National Socialism between 1918 and 1933. In these rightist circles, 'Caesarism' was a commonplace. In a letter to Kleinau, 21st November 1926, Junger described the four pillars of Nationalism, the last of which was dictatorship.[73] Hitler himself though, was too loud and too plebian for him. Junger began to draw away from the Nazis, but was too deeply implicated to be openly critical of them.[74] In 1933, Spengler commented on Hitler's accession: "This seizure of power — it is with misgiving that I see it celebrated each day with so much noise."[75] Soon after this, mutual disdain set in, Spengler eventually dying in 1936. Similarly, Junger's attitude prompted Lukacs to write: "Only Junger's sectarianism separates him from National Socialism."[76] Through the 1930s, Junger wrote of pain, and then of disillusionment. During WW2 he was in Paris, on the edge of the Rommel plotters. In 1941, he wrote an allegory about tyranny, *Auf Den Marmorklippen,* very little of which could be published at the time, but the little that was, was praised by the post war German literary figure, Heinrich Boll.

## Coldness of Technology

Junger's progress shifted from 'The Worker' of 1932, through the 'African Diversions', the Foreign Legion novel, of 1936, towards the later works. In the "Total Mobilization' of the early phase, Junger expressed exhilaration, intoxication, technological vitalism, the Dionysian. By 1936, technology was being linked to coldness, the promise had not been fulfilled. Like Spengler, Junger saw that technology had a diabolical side. It turned men into 'machines of evil.'[77] A decade, a world war, a Holocaust later, Junger

[71] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West (*1922) tr C F Atkinson, Allen and Unwin, London, 1961.

[72] the theme of Spengler's book, *Der Mensch und die Technik,* 1931.

[73] Woods, *op cit*, p 109.

[74] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism, Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge U P, 1984, p107.

[75] quoted in William L Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Secker & Warburg, London 1960, p 260.

[76] Georg Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason,* tr Palmer, Merlin London, 1980, p 466.

[77] Ernst Junger, *African Diversions*, (1936), tr Stuart Hood, J Lehmann, London 1954.

came to recognize that pure technicians, scorners of morality must not be permitted to lead. He saw the need to overcome the nihilism of the amoral technocrats.[78] In *Uber die Linie*, Junger examined the bureaucrats, and in *The Gordian Knot* he contrasts animals and civilization, men with automata.

## Heidegger the Nazi Fuhrer — Rector

Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi Party serves as the archetype for all subsequent episodes where academics have subordinated truth and virtue to power and political expediency.[79] In his Rectoral Address, *The Self Affirmation of the German University*, given on 27th May 1933[80] Heidegger also declared "The fuhrer himself and he alone is the German reality, present and future, and its law." The ceremony was performed complete with the singing of the Horst Wessel Lied, with Heil Hitler salutes; Rectoral memo 5288 ordering "After conferring with the leader of the student body, I have decided to confine the raising of the hand to the fourth verse."[81] Similarly with Heidegger's telegram to Hitler, 20th May 1933, regarding the progress of the *gleichschaltung* (kicking into line) of the German universities, and another telegram to Reich Commissioner Robert Wagner, hot from locking up Communists and Social Democrats in a Concentration Camp: "Delighted by your appointment as Reichsstatthalter, the Rector of the University of Freiburg im Breisgau greets the Fuhrer of our native borderland with a Sieg Heil from a brother in arms. Heidegger."[82] In the indictment we should also consider Heidegger's anti-semitisim, the Baumgarten affair, and his willing participation in Gestapo 'Operation Sternheim', 10th February 1934, against the chemist Hermann Staudinger (Nobel Prize 1953)[83] We should also include Heidegger's organizing the Hitler Youth, SA, SS and Stahlhelm camp, at Todtnauberg, October 4th — 10th 1933 in our considerations.

## Surrender to the Vortex

> *Heidegger's overt and hidden critique is based on a gross misunderstanding, and that he is embarked on the development of a systematic philosophy of the kind that I have always thought it my life's work to render permanently impossible.*
>
> Edmund Husserl on Heidegger

[78] Junger, *Der Friede*, Amsterdam, 1946, see Woods, *op cit,* p 285.

[79] I have written on this topic previously, 'Tales From the Black Forest' *Anarchist Lancaster Bomber*, issue 29, January 2000, pp 7–13.

[80] Richard Wolin ed *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, NY 1991, p 32.

[81] Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A political Life*, Harper Collins, London, 1993, p 153.

[82] Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil,* Harvard UP 1998, p 241.

[83] Ott, *op cit*, p 210 ff.

With Heidegger, we have moved away from dancing on the edge of the abyss. Hannah Arendt later described Heidegger's position as 'Surrender to the Vortex'[84] Indicative of Heidegger's character[85] is his treatment of his colleague and one-time benefactor, Edmund Husserl. While he could, between 1919 and the late 1920s, for his own convenience, Heidegger rode the Phenomenological bandwaggon. Yet all throughout, Heidegger rejected Husserl's Phenomenological Reduction, but did not voice his repudiation in public.[86] As early as 14th July 1923, Heidegger was secretly criticising him, writing "Husserl has lost his marbles."[87] With the coming to power of the Nazis, Husserl, as a Jew, was suspended from his university position, and forbidden to use the library, but contrary to myth, the 6th April decree was Wagner's, not Heidegger's doing. It was Elfride Heidegger who rubbed salt in the wound by sending flowers and an obnoxious note to the Husserl's. Heidegger cut the dedication to his Jewish former mentor, Husserl, from the title page of his main book, *Being and Time*. Heidegger's career as Fuhrer-Rector weighed against him at the December 1945 denazification tribunal. Karl Jaspers was asked to write a character reference for him. Jaspers had been stripped of his university position in 1937, because his wife was Jewish, and was forbidden to teach and publish. Karl and Gertrud Jaspers carried poison capsules with them all through the Hitler years. Jaspers' reply to the tribunal did for Heidegger. "Heidegger's mode of thinking, which seems to me to be fundamentally unfree, dictatorial and uncommunicative, would have a very damaging effect on students at the present time."[88]

## Heidegger and Technology

> *To be primitive means to stand, from an inner urge and drive, at the point where things begin to be primitive, to be driven by internal forces.*
>
> Heidegger to Jaspers, November 30th 1933.

Heidegger's critique of technology is contemporary to that of his friend Ernst Junger. A good starting point to examine this is the lecture 'The Age of the World Picture' (June 9th 1938). Here, machine technology is seen to be autonomous, while at the same time, the arts have become subjective. Scientific research is something less than art, reduced down to mere procedure; mechanistic. Research is framed, determined by previous work. Problems are outlined and then solved in this systematic, rigid, mechanical way. One of Heidegger's principal analogies is the notion of philosophy as

[84] Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, London 1958, p 326.

[85] see his postwar apologetics eg 'The Rectorate 1933–34 Facts and Thoughts.' *Review of Metaphysics* Vol 38, 1985., pp 481–502

[86] Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1965, p 299.

[87] Ott, *op cit,* p 182.

[88] Safranski, p 341, Ott, p 338

a clearing out in the middle of the forest, and the situation is seen as a journey along a path towards this. In this lecture, science and technology are likened to making out the ground plan of a building, and then working upwards and outwards from this. This is similar to Junger's analogy of a tower in the *Urwald*. Heidegger sees specialization as the foundation for all progress.[89]

## Mastery

Heidegger's view of technology as a whole owes much to his friend, Ernst Junger's concept of 'Total Mobilization'. It is about 'striving after mastery'[90] Similarly, in other places, Heidegger talks about rivers and waterfalls, contrasted with hydro-electric power plants, similar topics were mentioned above in the discussion of Junger and Spengler (*Der Mensch Und Die Technik*, 1931 eg) Heidegger draws a distinction between the things being 'Present-at-hand' and 'before oneself'. 'Presencing' is also an important concept here, like the statue being latent inside the as yet uncarved block of marble. Technology is ultimately alien, the attitude of the individual is a matter of his / her 'Openness-for-being', and this requires as "ecstatic realm for the revealing and concealing of Being."[91]

## Blind Alleys

In *Holzwege* (*Woodpaths*, 1950) the attack on science is resumed. Science is seen as a degeneration, simply procedure as before, and this is unfavourably contrasted with the poetry of Holderlin — Holderlin being an important haven of escape for Heidegger, in his flight from the political when his affair with the Nazis cooled, after his Fuhrer-Rector period ended. The poet is 'on the track of the holy', the poet names the holy, is on the road to the divine. (Names are important, they confer power)

## Enframing

In 'The Turning', the material related to the lecture given on November 18$^{th}$ 1955, again, Heidegger appeals to the distinction between knowledge and technique, citing Aristotle in support.[92] Nature is being pursued, entrapped, turned into raw material, 'standing reserve' Heidegger writes of the concept of 'Enframing' (*das Ge-stell*) which

[89] Heidegger 'The Age of the World Picture' in *The Question Concerning Technology,* tr William Lovitt, Harper Torchbooks, USA, 1977, p 123.

[90] 'The Age of the World Picture', p 137.

[91] 'Age of the World Picture' p 154.

[92] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Bk VI, ch 3 — 4.

is seen as a trap, it is a matter of oblivion. Here he invokes the Greek word 'lethe', forgetting, and also 'alatheia' — the hidden coming into presence.

Fate and destiny are also part of this, and there is this sense of danger too. "If a change in Being — ie now, in the coming to presence of Enframing — comes to pass, then this in no way means that technology, whose essence lies in Enframing, will be done away with. Technology will not be struck down; and it most certainly will not be destroyed."[93] Heidegger's notion of technology is a tough character, he lies further down the road than the mere details, he won't allow himself to be ambushed or overcome by men. Like John Zerzan, Heidegger talks about the grief of all this. What is needed is a turning, a homecoming (*heimkehre*) and this turnabout takes place in language. Again, Holderlin is invoked, particularly the poem 'Patmos' in the lines:

> *But where danger is, grows*
> *The saving power also.*[94]

Man is poetically described as the 'Shepherd of Being',[95] but here, in a similar vein to Nietzsche, the gods have deserted mankind. Enframing turns everything into standing reserve, and nothing is left free to be as it genuinely is. Radio and film are destroying our perceptions, "hearing and seeing are perishing under the rule of technology." (one in the eye for Dr Goebbels).[96]

# Turning

The same way, in *Science and Reflection*, (1954) Heidegger sees science as a power, a fabrication, a greater destiny. Science itself is defined as 'the theory of the real.' The words of Max Planck are quoted — 'That is real which can be measured.' Etymology is used to claim that 'theoria' allowed some "presence of the gods to shine forth through it."[97] Specialization, compartmentalisation 'sunders'.

Objectification distorts, things are understood via analogues, Heidegger cites the example of atomic theory here, with its models of atoms. Again, it is a matter of turning. "Travelling in the direction that is a way towards that which is worthy of questioning is not adventure but homecoming."[98]

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[93] 'The Turning' in *The Question Concerning Technology*, op cit, p 38.

[94] 'Question Concerning Technology' p 47, see *Holderlin, Poems*, tr Michael Hamburger, London 1966, pp 462–463.

[95] 'Question Concerning Technology', op cit, p 42.

[96] Question Concerning Technology', op cit, p49.

[97] Science and Reflection in *Question Concerning Technology*, op cit, p164.

[98] Science and Reflection, Question Concerning Technology', op cit, p180.

# Primalism

As mentioned earlier, Heidegger's position has been termed 'Primalism'. Four archetypal realms are felt to be fundamental, and Heidegger frequently returns to these: the heavens, earth, mortals and divinities. In his essay on *Antigone* (1953) Heidegger declares the earth to be the noblest of the gods, the plough is seen as violence. He describes a process whereby the savage hunter and primitive sailor become the civilised builder of cities. It is a mistake to think of the origin as weakness. "The beginning is the strongest and mightiest."[99] What comes afterwards is understood as a flattening, a spreading out, an emasculation. Thus it is an elitist vision. Here, the political context of the Cold War intrudes, with Germany sandwiched between the USA and USSR, both barbarians — Oh but a thousand pities for the defeat at Stalingrad! Everywhere, Heidegger sees "the same dreary technological frenzy", the standardization of man, the pre-eminence of the mediocre. Here, regarding technique, Heidegger is similar in tone to Ellul, or Herbert Marcuse; it all comes down to tools, manipulation, physical planning, consumption, the affluent society, propaganda; but Ellul and Marcuse are better, they do not have this creepy mystical overcast. Heidegger terms science "a darkening of the world". Here, Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra' is brought to mind:

> *For today the petty folk are become lord and master: they all preach submission and humility, acquiescence and prudence and diligence and consideration and all the long etcetera of petty virtues. What is womanish, what stems from slavishness and especially what is from the mongrel mob: that now wants to become master of mankind's entire destiny — Oh disgust! disgust! disgust!*
>
> Part IV, 'Of the Higher Man'[100]

# Verdict

Does the Spengler, Junger, Heidegger axis, in its criticism of technology, implicate Primitivism in Nazism? In my opinion, it does not. To make a case against Primitivism, it would be necessary to show that Primitivist thinkers incorporated elements from either Spengler, Junger or Heidegger, and that *these same* elements were also found in Nazism. That the axis have contributed some ideas into Primitivism is beyond question. Neither is there doubt that all three had influence in the formation of Nazism, and in Heidegger's case actively participated in it. On the other hand, Junger and

[99] Heidegger, 'The Limitation of Being' *Introduction to Metaphysices*, tr Mannheim, Yale UP, 1959, p 154.

[100] Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, Pt IV, 'Of The Higher Man', Hollingdale tr, Penguin, London, 1961, p 298.

Spengler were also (slightly) distant from it. Spengler fell out with the Nazis before his death, Junger was peripherally linked with the Rommel plot. Heidegger resigned the Rectorship when he found that he could not get his way with the Nazis. The axis had other ideas beyond those which helped create the initial climate of support for the NSDAP, though their guilt should never be understated. It is from these *other* ideas that Primitivists have drawn on. The case is similar to that of Postmodernism — the fact po-mo draws on Heidegger's ideas about language does not necessarily make po-mo Nazi, either.

## Technology

The Nazis tried to push technology as far as they could — as seen in the autobahns, the V2 rocket, and jet aircraft. In architecture, they went for the flat, gigantic Albert Speer style Neo-Classicism., the heroic, muscular spartanism of Arno Breker sculptures, and insipid nudes. Between the wars, Gide, Malraux, Marinetti, Yeats, Pound, Celine, Werner Sombart, D'Anunzio were saying similar things to Junger, for example, working in a similar vein. In the same area were also found Ernst Bloch, Mann, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Lukacs. The right does not have a monopoly on the criticism of technology.

## Reactionary Modernism?

> *On a jagged rock above us was a slim, brownish-black figure, who stood motionless, leaning on a long spear, looking down at the train. Beside him towered a gigantic candelabrum cactus. I was enchanted by this sight — it was a picture of something utterly alien and outside my experience, but on the other hand I had a most intense sentiment du deja vu. I had the feeling that I had already experienced this moment and had always known this world which was separated from me only by distance in time.*
>
> C G Jung, 'Memories Dreams Reflections', p283

Primitivism is not Nazism, but might its theorists be guilty of a lesser charge — that of 'Reactionary Modernism? The axis certainly fits in with this, and we have already examined the relationship between Primitivism, po-mo and Modernism in detail. Primitivism's rejection of 'leftism' could be taken to indicate that it was rightist in orientation, and here some Primitivists' common ground with libertarians might be used as evidence. There is also the matter of their anti-democratic tendencies in the rejection of Bookchin's Municipal Assemblies, and repudiation of community. Where the charge of 'Reactionary Modernism' is weakest is that there is no nationalistic element in Primitivism. However, there was an internationalist sub-set of Reactionary

Modernism — the attempt to unify European currencies, unify right wing youth movements, 'Personalism' was international in its influence, and again, there was the Uriage staff college in Vichy France. Various early features of the thinking and policies espoused by Otto Strasser, Goebbels, and Arthur Seys-Inquart were internationalist in scope. (these were later eclipsed). The Nazis forced technology into their mould, and pushed Neo-Classicism, but on the other hand, the Nazis also mounted mock Medieval pageants with Teutonic Knights on horseback and German maidens, they had an interest in such things as Tibetan mysticism, their racist theories about their own so-called 'Aryan' origins, or the SS shrine at Himmler's castle are other aspects. In their art, they idolized the primitive peasantry, (see the paintings of Martin Amorbach eg), and exalted blood and soil mysticism. Where the case for linking Primitivism with Reactionary Modernism is strongest is here, in the Mysticism of Primitivism. I have already discussed how Primitivists could be taking the blood and soil mysticism stuff a stage further, back into Junger's *Urwald,* Heidegger's clearing in the forest, or the primal homecoming described in C G Jung's Kenya. This is a possible understanding of Primitivism, but in my opinion a dubious one, not supported by the evidence.

## Excavating The Land Fill

Primitivists repudiate science, distrust science, dislike science, yet the Sahlins 'Primitive Affluence' material is used to appeal to the prestige of science. Primitivism above has been likened to a religion, with Sahlins as sacred text, and all challenges to the High Priest's interpretation thereof considered blasphemy. Such a view sits well with the characterization of Primitivism as an ideology. We could consider Primitivism a bastardised form of pseudo-radicalism. Why affect to despise science, while attempting to adopt its prestige? Here, Zerzan's extensive citations of other thinkers are a valuable pointer. "the tyranny of evidence", "the wall of culture" referred to by Alain C and Marielle[101] What *is* it as a scientific genre? — too vague for that. More like a curtain, a smokescreen, an emperor's new cloak. Where's the methodology, where's the field work, where's the empirical evidence? How did these value judgements get in here??? With this professed concern to find out about the dim and distant, primal past, it is not so much an excavation of the land-fill site, so much as an attempt to look deeper and deeper down, further and further into realms of speculation. Primitivism appears to be a strange form of archaeology. But in this mode, their activity is not a serious form of thought at all.

[101] Alain C and Marielle, *John Zerzan And The Primitive Confusion*, Chronos, London 2000.

## Tomb Raiders of the Lost Art

On the one hand, Cassirer says... On the other hand Horkheimer... Here, a key to understanding is that the Primitivists are not interested in carefully sifting the sand through sieves, or painstakingly reconstructing the corroded broach. They want the prestige of science without the effort. Here we have Alain C and Marielle to thank for the observation that if counter evidence exists, we could not rely on the Zen Tzar to weigh its significance, sift it, or even tell us of its existence.[102] No. It is not scientific, methodical, plodding archaeology we have here. Perhaps it is better thought of as a species of hoax like the Piltdown Man. Put those dead elements together, jiggle it. Paint the bones a different colour... Never mind about the forensics. Rip the bandages off the mummy. It is not a serious, open study. Or perhaps it is like that 1844 barrows excavation by Canon Greenwell in the Yorkshire Wolds; who collected quite an audience of ladies and gentlemen together and then directed his navvies to dig the chosen barrow, at length finding a large funerary urn, underneath which was a copy of the previous day's *Times*.[103]

Or Primitivism might be like Mr Greville Chesters, Dean Merewether, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, and other such like those Wiltshire squires of the 1830s, who for a passtime ripped open barrows morning, noon and night. Here is the Lukacs burrow, here is the Adorno — here is the Heidegger burrow — how big and monumental that one. What Teutonic chain mail he is wearing!

## They want the prestige of science without the effort...

The Primitivists' attitude to the past is nothing delicate and considered, more like a sudden nocturnal foray to break into the tomb, armed with pickaxes and pneumatic drills, to grab whatever they can rip out of it before daybreak. Where are the 'excavated' artefacts to be displayed though? Not in any living setting, nor in any institution devoted to truth, to education, to real knowledge, but in a dead, rather bourgeois theme park, with dusty glass fronted counters (no, don't let them examine the painted bones...) with shop worn displays, turn stiles, and huge entrance fees, all the better to fleece the punters. This is the proper setting for the 'deconstructive' work of the tomb raiders.

[102] "He has essentially bet on the fact that his word would be believed. This attitude falls within the lowest realm of propaganda." *Primitive Confusion*, p 6.

[103] Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology From The Earth*, Clarendon Oxford, 1954, pp 7–8

## Pit of Vipers

While this gang of tomb breakers were climbing down the tunnel, at the bottom of the shaft hissed a mass of heaving snakes. In Theresa Kintz's *Radical Archaeology As Dissent*[104] a description is given of how US archaeologists are called in to prepare the way for new roads or gas pipelines. The diggers are paid for by the US taxpayers, but they do not act in the public interest (p3) They cannot bite the hand that feeds, and so are co-opted, their work is recuperated, they become part of the heritage industry. Yet archaeologists are said to be in a unique position to criticise our throwaway society. How long will the roads and power stations last? "Archaeologists recognize how this alteration of matter our society engages in is unprecedented in terms of the scope of the distribution and essential durability of the composite materials modern technology is capable of creating." (p2) Perhaps they may even come to see the coming apocalyptic eco-breakdown through those mountains of empty beer cans. Contrary to Zerzan's critique of specialization, the 'Radical' Archaeologists[105] have scientific prestige which they can use to convince people. "Archaeologically derived knowledge of the past does provide a scientifically legitimate theoretical starting point for evaluating contemporary ideologies." (p3) Again, it is about prestige, the "in depth, distinctive understanding" provided by the US education system, and its universities. It is an elitist, Triumphalist vision. "This education experience teaches them to speak about the world we all live in with a legitimacy few others can command." (p4) Lower down though, we get to the real intent of the article, which is to complain about the low wages and lack of prestige of the archaeological underclass of diggers. Poor Bloody Infantry, working to commodify the past, part of the heritage industry, and to add insult to injury, with no professional status, they are disposable, not valued, getting a mere $8/hr — less than a fast food slave at McDonalds, and with a weak union! As usual, the bottom line is always the bottom line.[106]

**Lower down we get to the real intent of the article, which is to complain about the low wages and lack of prestige of the archaeological underclass of diggers.**

## The Vagueness Objection

One possible understanding of Primitivism, as a radical posture, harmonises much of what is valid in all of the foregoing. Do Primitivists want a literal return to Croatan, or is their spiritual Croatan a lot like something else — Hobbes' 'Nightmare' or Freud's 'Primal Scene', or some sub Abiezer Coppe Ranter's Bacchanalia? Primitivists are long on criticism of the present, but short on detail about what they really want

[104] 26th April 1998, OFF! Magazine, Binghamton NY USA.

[105] In the political sense inferred here, is there such a thing as 'Radical' Archaeology?

[106] The Kintz article can be found at www.geocities/com/2065/radarch

for the future. When it comes down to it, Croatan is indescribable, because it is without content (or perhaps hiding behind sophistry, bloody-mindedness or a facile appeal to Saussurean linguistics?) So perhaps Primitivism is simply a meaningless proposal. Under this charitable understanding Primitivists are misguided. Another, less charitable interpretation relegates this down to the register of conscious deception, seeing the cleverness of what they are about. In leaving the detail of their future utopia open, it cannot be criticised, while at the same time, it can be all things to all people. Potential believers are free to draw in their own particulars. Following on from these points (the vagueness of the proposal, the radical meaninglessness of Primitivism) we can see why Primitivists are incapable of taking any real practical steps to get us out of this mess.

# 7. So What is to Be Done?

Primitivism is a defective analysis, but some, even many, of the problems it purports to address are real. No reader of this pamphlet should go away with the idea that global warming is not happening, that the poles are not melting, that the island of Tuvalu will not have to be evacuated. Severe weather, floods in Yorkshire or the Severn Valley, El Nino — industrial processes, road vehicles, power station emissions, deforestation, urbanization, airliners all contribute to the greenhouse effect. There are many other related problems, like ozone layer depletion, or 'Pandoras Box' topics like the nuclear industry, genetics, and nano-technology. There is the whole culture of consumption and waste; the piling up of landfill sites on the edge of town, incinerators, dioxins in the air, chemicals in the water, contamination of food. Capitalism and global corporations reduce all human relationships down to money. We *desperately* need to address questions of social justice, like unemployment, the exploitation of workers, sweat shops, gender inequalities, racism. Globalization undermines and destroys societies in the Third World. The G8 squeezes the underdeveloped countries with this debt burden. Capitalism breeds poverty. Social injustice also encompasses questions of urban alienation, crime, drugs, state surveillance, the police state and media propaganda. These problems are real, but for all their bluster, the various strands of Primitivism do not address them.

## Primitivism as Displacement Strategy

These problems are real, and are so great and many faceted that people despair of ever dealing with them. It is too much for one movement to deal with, let alone an isolated, alienated individual. The popular perception is that few are taking any serious action to try to solve this, so why should I bother? Eco-protesters are like Swampy, or sandal-wearing muesli weavers. Then, inside the movement, frustration and despair over the lack of progress and political impotence brings reluctance to act against just a single, particular problem. There is a perception that all the problems connect together. It is but a short step from that to thinking that some abstraction — capitalism, globalization, or technology is the root cause; and this abstraction is the medium inside which all the problems connect. The task becomes one of attacking the abstraction, and activity slides away from the practical into the theoretical. Primitivists seek to transcend the mundane, to leap right out of the framework, (and so do other such ideologies) Along with this slide comes an 'ecologier than thou' attitude. Only

Primitivists have *The* Correct Analysis. As few people are acting, the activists must make up for the lack, in the theoretical domain, by making their rhetoric *more* virulent. It is a compensation mechanism. This is the type of thought process which probably drove Ted Kaczynski away from the woodwork bench towards the typewriter. It is a compensation mechanism, but it is also a form of substitution offered for the lack of a wider, broader and effective ecology movement.

# Primitivist Responses to this Pamphlet

Experience of political disputes has shown me that they progress along similar trajectories. First, the Primitivists will try to ignore this. To refuse to acknowledge the existence of something is a form of censorship and disparagement. Second, when it becomes obvious to them that the wide world knows of this booklet, will come ridicule: "Booth's view of Primitivism is laughable.", "The charge is absurd." Next, comes the more direct *ad hominem* (against the person) material — "It's all sour grapes", along the lines Rogers has already taken. Fourthly comes attempted criticism of the content, either by objecting to the form of it, false claims about the content "he accuses us of being fascists" perhaps, misrepresentation or trivialization of the argument. We will see the 'Straw Man Retreat', where the Primitivists will say "Booth has an incorrect grasp of Primitivism", "He misrepresents us", or make accusations of quoting the sages out of context, "Primitivism is non-ideological..." etc etc etc, or various attempts to redefine Primitivism. Like New Labour, the Primitivists are already attempting to change the name of their ideology and re-launch its image — all window dressing and spin. One variation of this sort of technique already being deployed in the USA against criticisms of Primitivism being made there is the claim that John Moore (the author of the 'Primitivist Primer') is no longer a Primitivist. This is hardly news: Moore was expressing disatisfaction with the term at least as far back as *GA* 40/41, Spring 1996, in his 'Commentary on the Anarcho-Futurist Manifesto'. In all this, what I do not expect to see is any serious questioning of Primitivist fundamentals, such as Why does technology necessarily pollute, waste resources, and exclude human autonomy? Why is Zerzan's critique of language disproven by his capacity to make it? (Disregard this sentence inside the brackets — it is a lie!) Why does the poverty of the Primitivist imagination exclude technologies which could enhance human freedom, eliminate waste, or destroy capitalism? Why exclude the subversive potential of everlasting lightbulbs, infinite strike matches, the clockwork radio, personal CCTV camera pulse-disruptors, wads of perfectly forged banknotes being given out to pensioners, secret news of government misdeads being posted comprehensively on the internet?

## Croatan is an Undesirable Destination

The hypocrisy of the Primitivists' own use of technology underlines the question: Why would anybody want to move out to Croatan? The Primitivists idealize primitive life; drinking dirty water, suffering dysentry, being infested with tape worms, covered in lice; keeping on the run away from the hyenas, crocodiles and lions — how long would your average Primitivist last? It is clear that Zerzan's use of the 'primitive affluence' material lifts it from its anthropological context and interprets it in an ideological way. Croatan itself is an unchallenging environment — by this I mean it does not admit of human development because *a priori*, the step of agriculture must be 'refused'. Is this *all* humanity could or should be in the future? How narrow. Primitivists seek to shut up the range of future possibilities, to create a kind of eternal stasis. All development, all increase in human potential must be stopped. As such, it is the *negation,* not a full expression of our humanity. Primitivist self-description is false. Small wonder that few want to buy into it. The rejection of symbolization and language would reduce our minds to a cosmic silence. The other type of windy Primitivist new age mysticism on offer is similarly empty.

## Our Need for a Positive Direction

Primitivism is a developed world counsel of despair, but the real debate needs to be about how we tackle the problems outlined in the first paragraph of this section. They are all actions which individual people commit against each other or on the environment. They have individual aspects, communal aspects, institutional aspects. You cannot attack an abstraction, (George W Bush's war against that terrorist language isn't going very well) but human actions and policies can be changed — slavery was abolished, women got the vote, the Iron Curtain came down. It is a series of questions about human actions and choices; about reality, not an abstraction. One criticism of the Primitivists has been that they have been proved incapable of developing a *praxis*, a practical approach to dealing with the problems. Much of the cause of this stems from their ideology, the rest is a consequence of bad personal relations. Primitivists have no real sense of community, no ethical dimension. 'Fuck ethics!' as Paul Rogers so eloquently put it. The few examples of Primitivist praxis we are able to examine; like the Unabomber, and the Primitivist elements of the Black Bloc, are not well thought of by other members of the protest movement. The UK Primitivist Network folded, its magazine 'The Missing Link' largely stillborn. *Green Anarchist,* mostly stagnant during its Primitivist period, has split because of it. The US rift between *Fifth Estate* and Zerzan, Saxon Wood sacked from the US *Green Anarchy* magazine for not being Primitivist, and the Eugeniard *Black Clad Messenger* has folded — why should anybody wish to involve themselves with this writhing pit of snakes? Even some US Primitivists see this, and want to change their window dressing.

## Tomorrow is Already Here

Sometimes it is a very cruel thing to deprive people of their illusions, but at other times it is necessary to do so. A positive critique of Primitivism needs to suggest workable alternatives. Primitivism is so far out that it cannot work. Such beliefs have no real capacity to change the world for the better. Indeed, its character is such that it may have impeded positive change — one view of Primitivism (which I do not share but merely report here) is that it is a system or state-sponsored school of thinking calculated to make the ecological movement look stupid. Because it is fundamentally implausible, Primitivist beliefs have no capacity to convince people to change. Jason McQuinn was right when he said Primitivism would only attract 'marginalised malcontents'.

## A Modest Proposal

So what would work? What is wrong with appropriate technology? What is wrong with sustainability? What is wrong with social justice? Social justice at home and abroad, ethics, a radical change of attitude towards each other, the planet and the Third World. Such a vision looks rather like an updated version of Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. We need to go back, not to the Palaeolithic, but back to traditional anarchism, informed throughout with an ecological understanding, and a positive vision — green anarchism. Such an approach would seek to dismantle globalised capitalism, resist the emerging world state. We need to radically decentralise power, keep control over resources at the local level, assert real democracy. If there are to be taxes, let them be under local control. Food production, the economy must be local. The poor, both in our own towns and in the Third World, need to be built up; with a basic right to things like clean water and health care. But just think what the world could be like if the machinery was genuinely put to work for the benefit of all. It is no use our complaining about cars, for example, without working towards positive alternatives like public transport. Commuters sit in the traffic jams because, realistically, they do not have a choice — their jobs demand it. If they have no alternative, our criticism pushes them away from taking up a green analysis. We need to oppose global capitalism, with the collapse of Communism in 1989 as a starting point for our model. Communism collapsed because the majority of people did not believe in it, and an alternative was on offer. Communism also went because the party officials were demoralised, stopped believing in it and stopped enforcing it. Over and over and over again, we should be beaming messages of how much better the green alternative really is, into every home, every workplace, day and night. The new world will rise out of the ruins of the old, already in place. Tomorrow is already here.

## Multi-Dimensional, Parallel Processing

None of this is new or radically different from what many of the excellent campaigns are already doing. We all need to work much harder at it. What sort of activity would be effective? The broadest range of opposition to oppression and exploitation, wherever it appears, on whatever level — a straightforwards application of Kantian ethics, (the Categorical Imperative, and treating people as ends in themselves, not means) the call on everybody to act against the problems, until they are overcome. Problem by problem, individual by individual, behaviour will change. Piece by piece, policy by policy, plant by plant, the world will change. The more people who get involved, the sooner progress will be made. We need a unity between the many groups — not of bureaucratic assimilation into a single monolithic entity, but a recognition of each other, a common purpose, a practical working together, an end to sectarianism. We need a wider attitude of respect for the environment, for animals, and for each other. To counter urban alienation, we need an emphatic assertion of the value of the individual. *Everyone* is needed — no one is expendable. Such an understanding feeds into the civil liberties issues. The emphasis should be on practical action, on building up momentum, on building up critical mass all the time. There are no quick fixes, no short cuts; just practical work. It is much harder to build something positive than negatively to tear down, but holders of a doctrine such as Primitivism feed off negativity. The real challenge is that we need to build up this active, vibrant, diffuse movement, full of men and women with real vision, which acts on and attacks all aspects of the problems at the same time. A multi-dimensional, parallel processing approach.

## Visibility

At this point, we don't need new groups, new theories. We need to make much better use of the ones we already have. How can we enhance the things already happening, build virtuous cycles? It starts with *visibility.* Some people hardly even know we exist. Have the courage of your convictions. Stop hiding behind PO boxes, and silly names for non-existent groups. Get out there. A politics of optimism and openness. We need to link up with the wider public, put our ideas across to them, try to find out their perspective on things. Primitivist bullshit just won't be listened to, confirming as it does the worst, most negative anti-green stereotypes. We need public involvement, dialogue, input. The political problem boils down to three things: (1) *Numbers* of people actively involved. (2) *Money and facilities.* If we can get the numbers of active people, we can get the website, the pamphlet, the bus to take us all to the protest, etc. (3) The *quality* of our activities together. This is what it is all about. If we can build up the critical mass, we can get the capacity to convince people of our analysis, and this leads to further action, more people, more activity, and changes of behaviour.

Cancel Third World Debt, create social justice, dismantle the multi-nationals, make that shift to public transport, stop polluting the environment.

Stephen Booth

January 8th 2001

**An Ounce of Honest Practice is worth Ten Tons of Dishonest Theories**

The Ted K Archive
A critique of his ideas & actions

Stephen Booth
Primitivism: An Illusion with No Future
January 8th 2001

<http://www.greenanarchist.org.uk/Prim.htm>

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