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Barbaric Thoughts

On a Revolutionary Critique of Civilization

References

Michel de Montaigne, "On the Cannibals" – Renaissance era depiction of the "noble savage".

Jean-Jacque Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* – Enlightenment era depiction of the same.

John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* – In my opinion his best and least ideological book. It contains the "Origins" essays. His other books include *Future Primitive* and *Running on Emptiness*. He also edited the anthologies *Questioning Technology* (with Alice Carnes) and *Against Civilization.* Zerzan is the best-known anarcho-primitivist.

Species Traitor – Publication of the Coalition Against Civilization, puts forward the theory of an inherent "primal" human nature as the basis for its primitivism.

Green Anarchist – British anarcho-primitivist, anti-civilization publication. Source of Steve Booth's "The Irrationalists".

Wolfi Landstreicher, *The Network of Domination* – Collection of essays examining the institutions, systems and social relationships that comprise civilization from a non-primitivist, anti-civilization perspective. (Available from Venomous Butterfly Publications).

There are many other texts and publications of interest to those who want to explore anarchist and revolutionary critiques of industrialism, technology and civilization, but these are referred to directly or indirectly in ***Barbaric Thoughts*** *or deal in a significant manner with ideas brought up in the text.*

A few final words

I have written this due to my disappointment at the direction much of the discussion of the critique of civilization has taken. Basing itself in ideals placed above us, it becomes permeated with dogma and moralizing, with consequent misunderstanding on all sides. More significantly, these ideals are of little use to those who are trying to develop a revolutionary critique of civilization with practical relevance in the daily struggles of the exploited against their condition. To be revolutionary, a critique of civilization needs to have such relevance. This means that it will offer no final answers and may indeed appear to stutter like the barbarian who doesn't know the language of the city, that is, of politics. But in practice this refusal of final answers goes hand-in-hand with the swinging of the iconoclast's hammer, smashing every idol and dogma, even those in the temples of anarchy and anti-civilization. It is my hope that these written explorations prove useful in our ongoing development of such a critique.

BARBARIC THOUGHTS

On a Revolutionary Critique of Civilization

I am convinced that a revolutionary challenge to the current social order must necessarily be a challenge to the last ten thousand years of institutional development that have created it. In short, revolutionary critique must aim at civilization itself. But what precisely does this mean?

On all sides of the so-called debate over civilization among anarchists, misunderstanding seems to be the only constant. This is not surprising. These concepts are difficult, especially in terms of their practical application in social struggle. In order to gain some clarity, I think that it is necessary to examine a few questions: What is revolutionary critique? What is civilization? What does a revolutionary critique of civilization mean in the realm of ideas? What would a revolutionary critique of civilization mean on a practical level? Each of these questions opens up thousands of other questions, especially as one tries to apply them in a revolutionary practice. But this should only frighten those who have placed their faith in an ideology and confined themselves within a supposedly "revolutionary" identity. For the rest of us such questioning should be a fine challenge, a place for putting ourselves on the line as a stake to be played.

What is revolutionary critique?

Revolutionary critique is a critique that aims to challenge the present society at its roots in order to create a rupture with what is and bring about radical social transformation. What else could "revolutionary" mean? But there are many implications here.

First of all, revolutionary critique is practical. It seeks a method for working itself out in the world, for *practically* challenging the present social order. In other words, it is part of a real struggle against the world that exists.

For this reason, it also begins from the *present*. A practical, revolutionary challenge to the present will make use of the past and the future, but will not be defined by them. Rather they are

tools to use in the attack against the present social order. Revolutionary critique is a practice that strives to grasp *everything immediately* here and now. It involves an ongoing, incisive examination of the state, capitalist social relationships, class struggle and technological development as we encounter them.

Since revolutionary critique aims at a *rupture* with the present order, it begins with an attack upon all the institutions of this society. It investigates their fundamental relationships to each other and what these relationships mean. Thus, it is not so much interested in their excesses or the ways in which they may contradict the values they proclaim, but in how *at their best*, even when they live up to their proclaimed values, they fail to meet the basic needs and desires of human beings. This society is fundamentally anti-life, anti-human and anti-individual, simply because its own reproduction requires the subjection of living human individuals to its needs. Revolutionary critique starts from this realization.

Revolutionary critique also absolutely rejects *moral* critique. This may be the most important aspect in terms of my argument. Revolution, in practice, is amoral. Even if at times, in our struggles, a few use the rhetoric of "justice" and "rights", our revolutionary battle has nothing to do with justice or rights or any other value external to us. We want to overturn this reality not because it is unjust or evil or even "unfree", but because *we want our lives back!* Morality belongs to this social order. It has been used over and over again to keep us in our place – always backed up by the force of arms. Morality serves well for maintaining what is, because its final word is always constraint. Since we want to destroy what is, we must also destroy morality – especially that which exists within us – so that we can attack this society without constraint.

At the same time, revolutionary critique does not reject principles.[*] Rather it helps us to determine a principled manner

[*] In fact, Nechaeyev's replacement of revolutionary critique with a moral idealization of "revolution" led him to reject principles. In the name of this highest ideal, anything could be justified. A similar logic created the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Reign of Terror.

question, "What can I take up as my own to use as a weapon for destroying this society? What can I use as a tool for creating the life I choose with others against this society?" Social institutions and the industrial system carry the relationships of domination and exploitation within themselves. They are useless to the project of taking back our lives.

But it is in the course of struggle against this civilized order that we will discover what tools and techniques we can take as our own to use for making our lives. Any anti-civilization critique that tries to define these possibilities beforehand is a *moral* critique and of little use in revolutionary transformation. Nonetheless, we can draw conclusions about a couple traits these tools would have. First of all, the users of the tools would need to be able to clearly understand on an immediate level the consequences of their use. Any tool of such complexity that its consequences remain invisible to the user, having no direct relationship to his reason for using the tool, would constitute a technological system. The theft of life is embodied in such a system, because those who use it have no control over the outcome of their use. Rather they become the victims of consequences beyond their capacity to foresee. We see the results of this in environmental devastation and the various epidemics and other threats to health all around us, as well as in the spread of technologies of social control into every corner of the earth. Secondly, every technique used would have to be reversible. If a technique proves to be harmful or dominating, we need to be able to lay it down immediately and go on about our activities using other means. This rules out any large-scale technical systems, since they themselves consist of intertwined, inter-dependent techniques that reinforce each other and in turn transform us into dependent parts of the machinery as well.

I hope that without presenting a model, I have given some idea of what a revolutionary critique of civilization might look like as it acts in the world. Of course, there can be no model for the violent destruction of the world of domination and the seizing back of our lives that constitute social revolution. There can only be indications. It is up to us to figure out the meaning of those indications in our own lives where we are.

immediate aims. But those of us whose activity is informed by a revolutionary critique of civilization, and thus by a desire to destroy class relations as such, will only use methods which clearly express the struggle to take back our lives. Thus, we will refuse representation by any oppositional organization such as unions or parties, maintaining the autonomy of our struggle. We will refuse to petition, to negotiate or to compromise with the rulers of this world. We will choose the methods, times and places of our actions for ourselves. And we will attack the institutions and machinery of power that stand in our way. Our accomplices will be those who choose to share such methods, and our struggles will intertwine with others for as long as they choose to follow this path, and will separate as our methods and aims become incompatible.

In addition, since the struggle is to take back our lives and our capacity to create them collectively on our own terms, it will express itself as a luddite practice. At the very beginning of the industrial era, the luddites recognized that the factory system was a technological method for imposing specific social relationships of exploitation and control, and they attacked it. In the two hundred years since then, the methodology of the factory – the development of intertwining, mutually dependent technological systems into which social control and relationships specific to the needs of capital and the state are built – has extended over the entire social landscape and our stolen lives are trapped as dead labor within this apparatus, reproducing its domination over us. Taking our lives back requires the destruction of the machine, so the play of Ned Ludd is central to the practical expression of a revolutionary critique of civilization.

The project of taking back our lives is fundamentally egoist. The fact that this project needs to become collective if it is to succeed does not change this. The intertwining of struggles and revolts based on affinity, complicity and revolutionary solidarity is a fine description of what a union of egoists might be. And egoism gives us another hint about how a revolutionary critique of civilization might act in the world (particularly in contrast to a moral critique). Rejecting all moralistic and deterministic ideology, the egoist does not look for sources of the original sin of civilization to renounce and avoid. Instead she raises the

for acting concretely against the ruling order in our daily lives. The lack of a revolutionary critique can lead us to face specific experiences of domination, exploitation and oppression as isolated incidents, and to seek an immediate solution by any means necessary. A revolutionary critique can expose the interconnections between these experiences and show how the "solutions" offered by the institutions only serve to increase their power over our lives. When we make a decision to take our lives back in revolt against the social order, we are choosing a way of encountering the world. It does not make sense for us to use any means other than those that embody this end of taking back our lives. This is true on the personal level and on the level of social revolution. Every time we compromise with power, that part of our life is lost to us. There are so many aspects of our lives where we are constrained to compromise against our will. In the areas of struggle, where we have a choice, an anarchist revolutionary critique will move us to refuse compromise and to maintain our autonomy.

What is civilization?

"Civilization" is a confusing word. Early European explorers often strongly associated what was "good" with civilization. Thus, when they encountered honest and generous non-civilized people, they would sometimes describe them as "more civilized" than Europeans. Today, the idea of civilization is frequently associated with good wine, beautiful human creations and refined tastes, but in reality the characteristics shared by all civilizations are far less pleasant: domination, genocide and environmental devastation to name a few.

Another point of confusion is that many people conceive of "civilization" as a single entity developing through time. This conception has its source in the myth of Progress through which modern western civilization, which now dominates the world, is justified and idealized. This myth assumes that humanity has developed along a single, fairly straight path that leads to where we are. In fact, civilizations have arisen in several different places without connections and without following a single path. Western civilization is traced back to the "Fertile Crescent", which is referred to as the "cradle of civilization". But Chinese,

Japanese, Incan, Mayan and Aztec civilizations, to name a few, have no connection to this "cradle". The rise of western civilization itself has not been a smooth path. Rather it is the crossing, converging and separating* of several paths, sometimes through trade, far more often through conflict. Thus, there have been several civilizations throughout history. A convergence of a number of historical factors allowed European civilization to carry out a conquest that has now spread across the globe. But the idea of a single civilization that has developed along a single path is part of the ideology of Progress, and a revolutionary critique of civilization must be careful to avoid this trap, because it can easily lead to a perspective that is simply a reversal of the concept of Progress, rather than a rejection of this myth. Such a reversal can only lead to a call to *return* to an imagined beginning which is itself a myth. A revolutionary critique of civilization needs to reject the mystification inherent in the idea of Progress, not create a counter-myth based on a moral judgment of Progress.

Although the idea of a single civilization is false, there are some basic traits that all civilizations have shared. These can be considered as defining qualities of civilization. They can provide basic understandings that are useful in clarifying what a revolutionary critique of civilization might mean.

Civilization comes from the Latin word *civis*, which means city-dweller. Thus, *civilization* is a way of life based upon city dwelling – upon dwelling within areas of concentrated human population separated from the areas where this population gets its sustenance. A revolutionary critique of civilization would thus want to examine the social relationships that create and are created by cities.

But the existence of what appears to be a city is not enough, in itself, to define civilization. So let's consider what happened when the first civilizations arose. It is generally agreed that the first civilizations began to develop about eight to ten thousand

* I am thinking here specifically of the definitive separation between European and Middle Eastern civilizations that occurred with the breakdown of the Roman Empire though I am certain other examples can be found.

last December and January (2003-2004), there were comrades pointing out that this was an opportunity to skip the imposed activities of this society and use the time instead to explore the possibilities of face-to-face communication and shared activity. And others sabotaged transit ticket machines. An intertwining of struggles was at least beginning to express itself. Recently in the United States, so-called "independent" truckers working at the docks in Oakland and L.A. had wildcat strikes. Revolutionaries in both cities went to talk with truckers. Some of the truckers expressed strong anti-war sentiments. Points of connection certainly existed.

And, of course, there is no need to wait for others to start a struggle. Our lives have been stolen from us; we have been dispossessed of our capacity to determine the conditions of our existence, and the enemy and its tools are everywhere around us. So we can initiate our own struggles. Consider the surveillance cameras over our heads. Consider the institutional and economic supports for the war in Iraq – and for wars elsewhere – that surround us. Consider the research in nanotechnology, with the horrifying possibilities it opens up for the penetration of social control directly into our bodies, that is happening right under our noses… The targets are not hard to find.

I have said that a revolutionary critique of civilization is based in class struggle. But I do not simply mean the struggle of one class against the other. More essentially, I mean the struggle of the exploited, the dispossessed, the proletarianized against their condition as such. It is obviously in the interest of the ruling class to maintain class society, and thus the entire technological and bureaucratic apparatus through which it operates. But it is not in our interest to maintain our class position. As long as we remain exploited, dispossessed, proletarian, we still do not have our lives. The reappropriation of our lives brings our existence as a class to an end; this struggle is the collective movement for individual liberation. So in class struggle the critique of civilization looks for the methods and forms that carry the destruction of class within them.

Understanding class struggle in this sense gives us a few clues as to its practical expressions. The specific incidents that provoke struggle will vary widely and may have lesser

Forced into poverty, immigration, homelessness and illegality, these undesirables have little, if anything, to lose in acting against this society. They are a class of barbarians within the gates of this vast civilized death machine. Even those who do not fall through the cracks find their existence increasingly precarious on all levels. If they were to see what they have in common with those who have fallen through the cracks, this could prove disastrous for the ruling order. And, of course, there are those who choose to live within the cracks for the relative invisibility it grants them, allowing them greater freedom to determine significant aspects of their lives. These people too have every reason to fight against the megamachine. The masters of this world are aware of all this and, in recent years, have been practicing fierce preventative repression in an open manner.

Uprisings and revolutions are not the product of radical ideas*, though such ideas can certainly play a significant role in the way an uprising develops – at least, if they are created and expressed in a relevant and revolutionary manner. But it is our rage over the conditions of existence imposed on us combined with a complete lack of faith in the capacity and willingness of either the ruling or oppositional institutions to do anything to change them to our advantage that can make self-organized revolt flare up as wildcat strikes, blockades of roads and docks, occupations of spaces, sabotage, vandalism, riots and insurrections. In these incidents and activities, we can see the desire to take our lives back directly confronting this civilization, which steals our lives away, as it exists here and now. These struggles are direct (if usually unconscious) attacks against the theft of our lives. This is why they express both class struggle and the struggle against civilization as we know it.

But then what of the consciously developed revolutionary critique of civilization? How does it express itself in practice? Each of us encounters bits of the network of control in our lives every day. Opportunities for attack are not lacking. So the problem is how to find accomplices, how to discover the small threads of revolt here and there and figure out how to weave them together. During the transit worker wildcat strikes in Italy

* This is why I have so little patience with evangelistic activities.

years ago. But what actually began to develop? The evidence we have indicates that certain specializations began to crystallize into a number of intertwined social institutions: the state, property, the family, religion, law, work (as an activity separated from life), etc. This process took place through the alienation of people's capacity to create their own lives individually and collectively on their own terms. This alienated creativity crystallized as concentrated power and wealth centered in the institutions of society. Based on dispossession of the great majority, the institutions are the representation of class relationships. With the rise of this institutional framework, society ceases to be a network of relationships between individuals for meeting their needs and desires, and instead becomes a network of predetermined, institutionalized relationships that stands above people and into which they must fit. Thus, they no longer consciously develop techniques together for meeting their needs and desires. Instead *technological systems* are developed with the aim of reproducing the institutional social order, which is itself a bureaucratic technology for mediating social relationships. The needs and desires of individuals are subordinated to this framework, and individuals themselves become cogs in the social machine. Their survival is made dependent upon this social machine locking them into an ongoing servitude that can only be broken through a radical rupture with the social order, a destructive overturning of existing social relationships, that opens the possibility for creating a new life together.

When I speak of civilization, I mean this network of institutions that dominates our lives.

What is a revolutionary critique of civilization in the realm of ideas?

If civilization is the network of institutions that defines and dominates our lives, then on a theoretical level, a revolutionary critique of civilization is an examination of the nature of these institutions. It examines the state, the economy and the technological systems they develop to control our lives. It examines the increasing precariousness of our existence on all levels. It is a class analysis aimed at the destruction of this

society, and so its basis is first and foremost our lives here and now in this world.

Unfortunately, much of what passes for critique of civilization nowadays fails to be revolutionary, because it chooses a basis other than our own confrontation with the social reality that is stealing our lives and our own desire to take back our lives. These other bases may seem to provide a model for a future non-civilized society or for current activity; or they may seem to provide a solid moral basis upon which to stand. But in either case, such bases cannot serve a *revolutionary* critique. Let's look at some of these ideas.

From a revolutionary point of view, biocentrism is utterly useless. It is a moral perspective at its very root. It starts from Life as an abstraction that stands above us which we are to serve. Although it is sometimes presented with a scientific basis (in ecological biology), it is essentially a metaphysical/moral perspective. Biocentrism is always opposed to *anthropocentrism*, supposedly "human-centered" thinking. Anthropocentrism is really just another name for humanism. Humanism is the ideology that starts from an abstract conception of the Human and places this above us as the ideal we are to strive to attain. Its practice in the social realm is based on the concept of rights that society is to protect. In reality, biocentrism does not challenge humanism at its roots. It simply seeks to expand the moral values of humanism to include all of Life and not just the Human. Life, not merely the Human, is the ideal we are to uphold. In the social realm, biocentrism merely seeks the expansion of rights and protections to the non-human without challenging the roots of the social order. This is why so many deep ecologists spend so much time working on litigation and legislation to protect this or that species or acreage of wilderness. This practice exposes the non-revolutionary nature of their perspective. In fact, since it rests in a representational practice (deep ecologist activists represent the Earth and Life in the courts and legislatures), it is at root a political and reformist viewpoint. A revolutionary critique of civilization will refuse this ideology completely.

An environmental perspective can be useful in exposing the harmfulness of the institutions that control our lives. The technological development necessary for maintaining social

The fact is that we *cannot* go back. North America still has fairly large regions of wilderness, some of which seems to be humanly livable for very small numbers. But it could not possibly support the hundreds of millions of people of this continent. In much of the rest of the world, wilderness has disappeared or been devastated. In Europe and most of Asia, for example, a foraging life is not an option for anyone. The road back is closed, and since the road forward is clearly leading us to increasing domination and disaster, it is clear we must leave the road and go *elsewhere*.

So a *revolutionary* critique of civilization requires us to leave all known paths. There are no easy answers or models to follow. From an anarchist perspective this shouldn't be seen as a negative thing, since it leaves no place for leaders or ideological dogmas. In fact, it brings us back to the present, to our lives and struggles, to the world we face.

So let's take a look at this world. A single civilization – that of the state and capital – dominates it. Despite totalitarian tendencies, this domination is not absolute. Other ways of being and relating exist at its margins and beneath its vision. Its spread across the globe has forced it to develop methods of social reproduction and control that are decentralized into a technological and bureaucratic network. Because control and the relationships of domination and exploitation are built into this network, it cannot be said that anyone, even the ruling class, actually controls it. It acts to control us not only through monitoring our activities, but more importantly by making us dependent upon it and by determining within very narrow parameters how we can interact with it. In short, it transforms us into cogs within its technological framework. This is why talk of seizing the current means of production for any purpose other than destroying them makes no sense. It is a means of domination and control, not of creating what we need and desire. The nodes of this network include computers, surveillance cameras, credit cards, ID cards and so on. This network seems to be everywhere, but it is stretched thin, leaving plenty of cracks and making it very fragile. One of the outcomes of this fragility has been that more and more people are falling through the cracks, finding themselves with no place within this society.

fact the rise of the centralization and institutionalization of power and wealth. Starting with the dispossession of a large number of people – with the stealing away of their capacity to create their lives on their terms –, relationships of domination and exploitation, that is to say *class* relationships, are imposed. With the institution of class relationships, class struggle begins. At bottom, this is the struggle of the dispossessed to take back their lives and the struggle of the ruling order to maintain its dominance.

If we begin our critique of civilization from this basis, we can see that the struggle against civilization is at root a class struggle and an egoist struggle. Its basis lies not in renunciation, but in the project of *reappropriation* – of stealing back what has been taken from us. The mega-machine of the industrial, capitalist state is a juggernaut for which each of us as individuals is nothing but fodder. The social relationships of its institutional framework are built into its technological system, making any vision of self-management of this vast apparatus absurd. So the point is to destroy it, not for "the Earth" or "Life" or "Wild Nature", but rather for ourselves, in order to freely experiment with the innumerable possibilities for relating and creating our lives without domination of any sort, for exploring the collective project of individual self-realization. So a revolutionary critique of civilization will have its basis in a communist and egoist critique of the existent – in other words, it will be fundamentally anarchist.

And how might it work out in practice?

A revolutionary critique of civilization stems from the desire for a world in which we, *human beings*, can live on our own terms, creating our lives together as a conscious ongoing project. It has no place for the misanthropy that is central to much biocentric ideology and sometimes infects environmental perspectives. Nor does it recognize either primitivist practice or "rewilding" as panaceas for the harmfulness of civilization. Though primitive skills may be useful and methods for healing and expanding wild places are *necessary*, they do not constitute the practical expression of a revolutionary critique of civilization.

control and the expansion of capital causes extensive damage. One important aspect of our current precarious existence is the increasing damage being done to our bodies and our living environments, raising the question of how much more we can take. But the harmfulness of this society does not just exist in the various physical toxins we are forced to ingest. If that were the limit of the problem, it might indeed simply be a question for the "experts" or one that could be legislated away. The fundamental harmfulness of this society lies in the social relationships it imposes. These social relationships make us dependent upon a massive technological system over which we have no control. And the physical harm of this system – the poisoning of rivers, the irradiating of food, the spread of toxic chemicals and engineered genetic material everywhere – is integral to its existence. Thus, an environmental critique can only become revolutionary by being part of a total critique of the social relationships that make us dependent on this toxic mega-machine. It can provide one tool in the development of that critique, but is not adequate in itself.

I have never called myself a primitivist, because I do not base my critique of civilization on real or presumed traits of so-called "primitive" societies. The ideology of a past Golden Age is at best pure speculation. We know very little about prehistoric human beings and how they lived, and the latest literature in the field has moved away from some of the more idyllic pictures popular among pre-historians a couple decades ago. We can read more about modern so-called "primitive" people in the writings of anthropologists, ethnologists and various other literate people who have traveled among them. And certainly this can provide some useful tools for examining civilization and human possibilities . But it is necessary to recognize that this knowledge is always speculative, partial and biased, and does not provide a basis for a revolutionary critique of civilization. Primitivism as an ideology idealizes the so-called "primitive". Some contemporary primitivists attempt to sidestep this limitation by referring to an alleged "primal nature" inherent to all human beings rather than to previously or presently existing primitive people. Although they may avoid the accusation of a hypocritical use of science for their own convenience in this way, they do not

escape the problem of basing their perspective on an external ideal. In fact, these primitivists have simply revived the humanist ideology with a twist: "primal" human nature becomes the "real" self we must discover and strive to attain. Being a form of humanism, this perspective is moral in its essence. It attempts to provide a basis for revolution without class struggle by replacing this with "primal war", but since the latter has its basis in our alleged "primal nature", and not in our actual confrontation with the circumstances the present world has imposed on us, it is simply a moral ideal of how revolution "should" come about. For Montaigne and Rousseau such idealizations remained a poetic means for lamenting the evils of civilization, but for some modern primitivists it becomes a moral ideal, a model for a post-civilization way of life and sometimes even a concept of what an anti-civilization practice should be here and now. As such, it is not useful to a revolutionary critique of civilization. It remains a mere moral critique based upon abstract concepts of good (primitive) and evil (civilized). Social relationships vanish in this idealization, and it is easy to get sidetracked into ideas and practices completely out of touch with the realities we face.

This may be why a few primitivists have gone so far as to reject the very concept of revolution, preferring to "prepare" for a coming collapse of civilization by studying "primitive skills" at high-priced schools started for that purpose. It seems that they imagine this collapse in a way similar to the visions of the Ghost Dance movement among Native Americans of the late 19th century, where civilized reality is simply pealed away to immediately reveal a pristine undamaged Wild Nature. Like the survivalists of a decade ago, these primitivists have given up on the possibility of people taking history into their own hands in order to destroy the order of domination and radically transform social relationships. So instead they dream of the apocalypse, after which a few will be able to live again in the Eden of their imagined "primitive" world.

In fact, if such a collapse occurred, it would almost certainly involve a drawn-out process involving massive war on the part of the various rulers of this world to maintain their power by whatever means necessary and an unmediated confrontation with the devastation the natural environment has undergone. I have no

to give up in the battle against this civilized world. Each of these struggles can be seen as part of an unfinished social war in which knowledge of the aim and the enemy become gradually clearer, but only if we encounter and wrestle critically with this past, rather than seeking a mythical past to use as an ideal. It is particularly important at this time when civilization itself is creating historical amnesia that we refuse to succumb to it, and that we continue to grasp revolutionary history as a weapon against the ruling order.

In short, for a revolutionary critique of civilization, the exploration of origins only has use as the opening up of areas for continual questioning. The fundamental concepts it calls into question need to be examined in terms of present-day social relationships, so that we can know where the points of conflict with the ruling order exist and understand what is at stake.

Another conception that has been used in developing a critique of civilization is that of "wildness". I am among those who have made use of this concept in exploring the meaning of civilization and what a revolution against it might be like. But there is a danger for the concept of wildness to be tamed – that is, to be crystallized into a concrete idea of what we *should* be and do. When I have used the concept of wildness in my critical examinations of the nature of civilization and the revolt against it, it is precisely because, unlike the "primitive", human wildness is an *unknown*. It does not provide answers or models, but raises questions. Its crystallization into a model takes the form of equating it with the way of life of human foragers and/or anthropomorphizing traits of non-human animals (like instincts). The idea of an inherent "primal" human nature falls precisely into this trap, defining an ideal, not raising questions of how we can take back our lives as our own. Defining wildness as a model turns it into a moral value that stands above us and our daily struggles. In this form it is not useful as a revolutionary tool. Only as a tension against the civilized reality that is imposed on us, that is to say only as a perpetual theoretical and practical questioning, can wildness have use in the development of a revolutionary critique of civilization.

A revolutionary critique of civilization is a critique of the *social relationships* of civilization. The rise of civilization is in

only speculate, and for some that is not satisfying. What we can do is examine the social relationships surrounding language, time and symbolic thought now. Such an examination is particularly interesting as it indicates that capital and its technological system are, in a certain sense, in the process of destroying language and time. The destruction of languages worldwide, the degradation of individual languages and the withering of imagination and with it the capacity to speak and live poetically are significant aspects of the reality we face. All of this can be traced to the needs of the ruling order, its technological development and the domination of the mass media and the internet over communication. This requires an analysis far more complex than declarations that language causes alienation. It is quite obvious now that the *loss of language* does not make us less alienated or less civilized, simply less capable of communicating with each other and of expressing any desires outside of the channels permitted by the ruling order.

In the same way, the world of capital, its technology and mass media is stealing away *our* time. In its stead we are given an eternal present, but not the edenic one Zerzan imagines. Rather it is the eternal present of routines repeated day after day that have no direct relationship to our own needs and desires, but that are required of us to earn the money we need to continue surviving at the level we're used to. This is coupled to the media portrayal of events around the world as unconnected moments without past or future. The present social order steals away the past as a living reality we can use in any meaningful way and the future as a place of possibilities and dreams, leaving us only with an impoverished present of day-to-day enslavement. Here too a deeper analysis of the current social relationships are necessary, one that allows us to take back our history and our dreams as tools to use against this society here and now.

Of course, primitivism itself refers to a past, but it is a mystified past that stands as an ideal above us, not a concrete past of revolutionary struggle against the ruling order. Some primitivists dismiss the latter because those in struggle did not have a conscious critique of civilization. But dismissal makes a critical encounter with these past struggles impossible. And a critical encounter with the revolutionary past is too useful a tool

desire to "prepare for" such a collapse, seeing it rather as one of the dismal possibilities this society offers. I would much rather put the effort into consciously dismantling the social order through revolutionary endeavors. A conscious revolutionary dismantling of civilization would involve a conscious confrontation with the realities civilized reality has created and an exploration of ways to restore truly livable environments.

Of course, the primitivists who openly reject revolution are very few. Nonetheless, I think that they are the one's who most consistently follow out the logic of primitivism. Idealizing what was would consistently lead to either passive admiration (as in Montaigne and Rousseau) or imitation, but not a radical and destructive confrontation with what is.

However, there is one very significant lesson we can learn from examining what is known about non-civilized people. Civilization has shown itself to be a homogenizing process. This becomes especially clear now that a single civilization has come to dominate the globe. It could even lead one to believe in a set human nature. But looking at what we know about non-civilized people, it becomes clear that there are vast varieties of ways that humans can live in this world, endless possibilities for relating with oneself, each other and the surrounding environment. Deterministic speculations have no place here. Instead, the very real possibilities for revolutionary transformation can be seen as it becomes clear that the social world we live in has not always been. But our possibilities will open up in the course of our project here and now, so the "primitive" cannot be used as a model, simply as one tool among many for achieving a clearer understanding of the nature of civilization.

One of the areas of theoretical exploration that developed among anti-civilization anarchists is the exploration of origins. This exploration certainly opened up many interesting questions. It has also opened the possibility for a drift into ideology. The first thing we need to keep in mind while exploring origins is that we cannot find answers. This can only be an area for speculation and raising questions. Otherwise, it turns into a search for the "original sin" after which the fall into civilization was inevitable, and we are on the path of a determinism that requires *redemption* not revolution.

The exploration of origins was mainly opened by John Zerzan in the 1980's. It is an attempt to look into the possible sources of alienation that made the rise of civilization possible. From the start one of the weaknesses of Zerzan's explorations was the lack of a clear explanation of what he meant by alienation. This lack of clarity infected those anarcho-primitivists who took Zerzan's writings as a major theoretical source. I understand alienation as the separation of our existence from ourselves through a system of social relationships that steals our capacity to create our lives on our own terms in order to use our energy to produce and reproduce what is necessary to maintain separated, centralized wealth and power. What is alien to me is thus that which I cannot enjoy as my own. Alienation, in this sense, cannot be caused by an idea or way of thinking. Its source must lie in social relationships. At times, Zerzan seems to use alienation in this way, but usually he is far more abstract, speaking of human alienation from nature in a quasi-mystical sense. And this latter conception seems prevalent in much of the anarcho-primitivist milieu. It is as if they see nature as a metaphysical entity with which humans once had an intimate relationship of unity and from which they have become separated. This is a precise parallel to christian theology, but god has been replaced with a unified nature. The idea of a "fall" into civilization (a term Zerzan frequently uses) follows logically from this. It also explains the frequent claims that we cannot experience unalienated moments in this world – after all, it is a fallen world. Rather than offering any adequate ideas of how fallen people in a fallen world could make a revolution to undo the fall, Zerzan, John Connor and some other primitivists take a strange pleasure in showing the social disintegration of the modern world as though this, in itself, was the path to the destruction of civilization. The low point of all this was Steve Booth's article "The Irrationalists". Booth, being unable to go further along this path, completely gave up any critique of civilization, choosing instead to become a supporter of the British Green Party. Zerzan himself resorts to evangelism – talking with journalists from *The New York Times*, *Spin*, and various other mainstream publications, appearing on Art Bell's radio show and on *60 Minutes*, going to "sustainability" and environmental law

conferences to present his message. That Zerzan has utterly compromised any revolutionary critique with this "practice" is irrelevant since we all have to compromise in this world. Only in the paradise that will arise when civilization falls can we escape compromise. Thus, Zerzan's revolution can only be understood as *redemption* from a fallen world. But who or what is the redeemer?

In fact, I think that it may be Zerzan's theological way of dealing with the matter of alienation that limits his own capacity to develop his explorations of origins in useful manner. Though Zerzan opened up important theoretical areas in calling language, time, symbolic thought, etc. into question, he failed to take advantage of this. Rather than exploring the nature of language, time or symbolic thought as social relationships and bringing this into the present, he came to accept his first declarations as final answers and began to repeat the same chorus that "this all has to go" and to judge others in terms of their adherence to what has become his line. And once he found a saint (and potential redeemer[*]) in the Unabomber, his ideology became so entrenched that he could no longer develop his ideas; he could only preach them.

Of course, attempting to explore origins does take one into treacherous waters. One has to be able to distinguish a necessary contingency from a cause. It is true, for example, that the rise of civilization is contingent upon the existence of language. But this does not mean that language inevitably leads to civilization. The existence of frontal lobes in the brain is also necessary to the rise of civilization, but does not cause it. It is the capacity to distinguish necessary contingencies from causes that allows one to escape the sort of determinism described above.

It is also easy, in the search for original causes, to reify social relationships. Zerzan has certainly done this with time, language and symbolic thought. Declaring them to be the source of our problem involves forgetting that they originate in social relationships, in real or perceived needs and desires developing between people. But we cannot know what these were; we can

[*] Consider the claim made by Zerzan and others that the Unabomber "tried to save us"