Ultimately, if we imagine *dismantling* civilization, actively and consciously *destroying* it, not in order to institute a program or realize a specific vision, but in order to open and endlessly expand the possibilities for realizing ourselves and exploring our capacities and desires, then we can begin to do it as the way we live here and now against the existing order. If, instead of hoping for a paradise, we grasp life, joy and wonder now, we will be *living* a truly anarchic critique of civilization that has nothing to do with any image of the "primitive", but rather with our immediate need to no longer be domesticated, with our need to be *unique,* not tamed, controlled, defined with identities. Then, we will find ways to grasp all that we can make our own and to destroy all that seeks to conquer us.

A Critique, Not a Program:
For a Non-Primitivist Anti-Civilization Critique

Wolfi Landstreicher

First of all, there is nothing inherently primitivist about a critique of civilization, particularly if that critique is anarchist and revolutionary. Such critiques have existed nearly as long as a self-aware anarchist movement has existed — and not always even connected to a critique of technology or progress (Dejacque felt that certain technological developments would allow human beings to more easily get beyond civilization; on the other hand, Enrico Arrigoni, alias Frank Brand, saw civilization and industrial technology as blocks hindering real human progress). The real question, in my opinion, is whether primitivism is any help at all to an anarchist and revolutionary critique of civilization.

The word primitivism can mean two rather different things. First of all, it can simply mean making use of what we know about "primitive" societies[1] to critique civilization. This form of primitivism appears relatively harmless. But is it? Leaving aside the obvious criticism of the dependence on those experts called anthropologists for information about "primitive" societies, there is another problem here. The actual societies that we call "primitive" were and, where they still exist, are living relationships between real, living, breathing human beings, individuals developing their interactions with the world around them. The capacity to conceive of them as a model for comparison already involves a reification of these lived relationships, transforming them into an abstract thing — the

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[1] The use of the term "primitive" — which means "first" or "early" — for societies that have existed into modern times without developing civilization carries some questionable assumptions. How can societies that exist now be "first" or "early"? Did they just now appear? In a living world that is in constant flux, have they somehow remained static and unchanging? Can human development only happen one way — as the development of civilization? Besides, which of these societies is the genuine "primitive" one? They are certainly not all alike, or even all that similar. Homogeneity is a trait of civilization, not of these other social realities. So to put a single label on all of them is ridiculous... So I choose to put the word "primitive" in quotes.

[2] I am speaking here specifically of a conscious, revolutionary, anarchist *dismantling* of civilization, and not its *collapse*. A collapse would not be an immediate, once-and-for-all event. In the process of a collapse, we would not just encounter the detritus of civilization. We would also confront its still living human trash in the form of politicians turned warlords in order to maintain their power, possessing extremely dangerous weapons — the so-called "weapons of mass destruction" — that they would most likely use viciously. The effects of the process of collapse would be devastating beyond anything we have yet seen.

[3] The poet, William Blake talked about them in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

[4] These high-priced schools will let those who lack money attend in exchange for unpaid labor, a form of exploitation euphemistically referred to as "work exchange", a term invented by the left-wing of new ageism — and so, inevitably, a load of bullshit designed to cover up the exploitative relationship.

abstract and reified images — in this case the image of the "primitive" — are those *ghosts* of desire[3] that drive commodity consumption. This manifests explicitly among some primitivists, not just in the consumption of books by the various theorists of primitivism, but in the money and/or labor-time spent to purchase so-called "primitive" skills at schools that specialize in this.[4] But this ghost of desire, this longing for an image that has no connection to reality, is not true desire, because the object of true desire is not an abstract image upon which one becomes focused — an image that one can purchase. It is discovered through activity and relationship within the world here and now. Desire, as I conceive it, is in fact the drive to act, to relate, to create. In this sense, its object only comes to exist in the fulfillment of desire, in its realization. This again points to the necessity of immediacy. And it is only in this sense that desire becomes the enemy of the civilization in which we live, the civilization whose existence is based on the attempt to reify all relationships and activities, to transform them into things that stand above us and define us, to identify, institutionalize and commodify them. Thus, desire, as a drive rather than a longing, acts immediately to attack all that prevents it from forcefully moving. It discovers its objects in the world around it, not as abstract thing, but as active relationships. This is why it has to attack the institutionalized relationships that freeze activity into routine, protocol, custom and habit — into *things* to be done to order. Consider this in terms of what such activities as squatting, expropriation, using one's work-time for oneself, graffiti, etc., etc. could mean, and how they relate to more explicitly destructive activity.

Ultimately, if we imagine *dismantling* civilization, actively and consciously *destroying* it, not in order to institute a program or realize a specific vision, but in order to open and endlessly expand the possibilities for realizing ourselves and exploring our capacities and desires, then we can begin to do it as the way we live here and now against the existing order. If, instead of hoping for a paradise, we grasp life, joy and wonder now, we will be *living* a truly anarchic critique of civilization that has nothing to do with any image of the "primitive", but rather with our immediate need to no longer be domesticated, with our need to be *unique*, not tamed, controlled, defined with identities. Then, we will find ways to grasp all that we

"primitive" — an idealized image of "primitiveness". Thus, the use of this method of critiquing civilization dehumanizes and deindividualizes the real people who live or have lived these relationships. In addition, this sort of critique offers us no real tool for figuring out how to battle against civilization here and now. At most, the reified, abstract conception of the "primitive" becomes a model, a program for a possible future society.

This brings me to the second meaning of primitivism — the idea that "primitive" societies offer a model for future society. The adherents to this form of primitivism can themselves rightly be called *primitivists*, because, however much they may deny it, they are promoting a program and an ideology. In this form, I actually consider primitivism to be in conflict with anarchic thought and practice. The reason can be found in the Novatore quote above. Simply replace "communism" with "primitivism" and "collective revolution" with "industrial collapse" and everything should be pretty clear. As I see it, one of the most important differences between marxism and anarchism is that the latter is not essentially an eschatological vision of a future for which we wait, but a way of confronting the world here and now. Thus, revolution for the anarchist is also not something historical processes guarantees for the future, but something for us to live and create here and now. Primitivism is no more livable now than the marxist's communism. It too is a *program* for the future, and one that depends on contingencies that are beyond our control to bring about. Thus, it has no more to do with anarchist practice than Marx's eschatology.

I have already pointed out how the very concept of the "primitive" reifies the real lives and relationships of those given this label. This manifests among primitivists who seek to practice their ideology now in the way this practice ends up being defined. In a way far too reminiscent of marxism, "primitive" life gets reduced to economic necessity, to a set of skills — making fire with a bow drill, hunting with an *atlatl*, learning wild edible and medicinal plants, making a bow, making simple shelters, etc., etc. — to be learned in order to survive. This might then be spiced up a bit with some concept of nature spirituality learned from a book or borrowed from new age bullshit perhaps referring to a return to a "natural oneness". But the latter is not considered necessary. The totality of the life of the people

labeled "primitive" is ignored, because it is largely unknown and completely inaccessible to those who were born and raised in the industrial capitalist civilization that now dominates the world — and that includes all of us who have been involved in the development of an anarchist critique of civilization. But even if we only consider mere survival skills, the fact is that even in the United States and Canada, where real, fairly extensive (though quite damaged) wilderness exists, very few people could sustain themselves in this way. So those who learn these skills with the idea of actually living as "primitives" in their own lifetime are not thinking of the destruction of civilization (except possibly as an inevitable future circumstance for which they believe they will be prepared), but of escape from it. I won't begrudge them this, but it has nothing to do with anarchy or a *critique* of civilization. On a practical level, it is much more like a more advanced form of "playing Indian" as most of us here in the US did as children, and, in reality, it is taken about that seriously. Nearly all of the people I know who have taken up the development of "primitive" skills in the name of "anarcho-primitivism" show how ready they are for such a life by the amount of time they spend on computers setting up websites, taking part in internet discussion boards, building blogs, etc., etc. Frequently, they come across to me as hyper-civilized kids playing role games in the woods, rather than as anarchists in the process of decivilizing.

An anarchist and revolutionary critique of civilization does not begin from any comparison to other societies or to any future ideal. It begins from my confrontation, from your confrontation, with the immediate reality of civilization in our lives here and now. It is the recognition that the totality of social relationships that we call civilization can only exist by stealing our lives from us and breaking them down into bits that the ruling order can use in its own reproduction. This is not a process accomplished once and for all in the distant past, but one that goes on perpetually in each moment. This is where the anarchist way of conceiving life comes in. In each moment, we need to try to determine how to grasp back the totality of our own life to use against the totality of civilization. Thus, as Armando Diluvi said, our anarchism is essentially destructive. As such it needs no models or programs including those of primitivism. As an old, dead, bearded classicist of anarchism said "The urge to destroy is also a creative

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urge". And one that can be put into practice immediately. (Another dead anti-authoritarian revolutionary of a generation or two later called passionate destruction "a way to grasp joy immediately").

Having said this, I am not against *playfully* imagining possible decivilized worlds. But for such imaginings to be truly playful and to have experimental potential, they cannot be models worked out from abstracted conceptions of either past or future societies. In fact, in my opinion, it is best to leave the concept of "society" itself behind, and rather think in terms of perpetually changing, interweaving relationships between unique, desiring individuals. That said, we can only play and experiment now, where our desire for the apparently "impossible" meets the reality that surrounds us. If civilization were to be dismantled in our lifetime, we would not confront a world of lush forests and plains and healthy deserts teeming with an abundance of wildlife. We would instead confront a world full of the detritus of civilization — abandoned buildings, tools, scrap, etc., etc.[2] Imaginations that are not chained either to realism or to a primitivist moral ideology could find many ways to use, explore and play with all of this — the possibilities are nearly infinite. More significantly, this is an immediate possibility, and one that can be explicitly connected with a destructive attack against civilization. And this immediacy is utterly essential, because I am living now, you are living now, not several hundred years from now, when an enforced program aimed toward a primitivist ideal *might* be able to create a world in which this ideal could be realized globally — if primitivists have their revolution now and enforce their program. Fortunately, no primitivist seems willing to aim for such authoritarian revolutionary measures, preferring to rely on some sort of quasi-mystical transformation to bring about their dream (perhaps like the vision of the Native American ghost dance religion, where the landscape built by the European invaders was supposed to be peeled away leaving a pristine, wild landscape full of abundant life).

For this reason, it might be a bit unfair to call the primitivist vision a program (though, since I have no use for bourgeois values, I don't give a shit about being unfair...). Perhaps it is more like a longing. When I bring up some of these questions with primitivists I know, they often say that the primitivist vision reflects their "desires". Well, I have a different concept of desire than they do. "Desires" based on

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