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Comin' Home: Defining Anarcho-primitivism

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At the opening of *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, perhaps the premier anarcho-primitivist text, Fredy Perlman remarks: “This is the place to jump, the place to dance! This is the wilderness! Was there ever any other?” 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. Perlman suggests that his notion is “the big public secret” in civilization: “It remains a secret. It is publicly known but not avowed. Publicly the wilderness is elsewhere, barbarism is abroad, savagery is on the face of the other.” But Perlman knows better than this and, perhaps as a result of his insight, so do we. And this knowledge is crucial. For in asserting the presence of the primitive, even in the midst of the megamachine, Perlman is marking the difference between anarcho-primitivism and other forms of primitivism in the West. And, furthermore, he is reclaiming a primitive identity for those trapped inside Leviathan. This is a crucial activity.

In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, a survey of twentieth century Western appropriations of the primitive, Marianna Torgovnick writes:

“The metaphor of finding a home or being at home recurs over and over as a structuring pattern within Western primitivism. Going primitive is trying to ‘go home’ to a place that feels comfortable and balanced, where full acceptance comes freely and easily ... Whatever form the primitive’s hominess takes, its strangeness salves our estrangement from ourselves and our culture” (p.185).

Superficially, this seems an attractive idea and one conducive to anarcho-primitivism. A linkage of the primitive with origins seems a logical one in the West. Living lives of profound alienation in civilization as we do, the idea of going home, going primitive, seems appealing. This notion of a journey back

to the primitive as a passage back to origins is echoed in the title of a recent volume edited by Ron Sakolsky and James Koehnline: *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Dropout Culture*. As the book's opening page explains, "The first "drop-outs" from English colonization in North America left the 'Lost Colony' of Roanoke and went to join the natives at Croatan." However, in making this linkage, radicals such as Sakolsky and Koehnline are unwittingly aligning themselves with notions of the primitive that are endemic in the West — notions that are used to underpin racism and imperialism.

The idea the West can discover its origins through a journey into the primitive contains a number of reactionary connotations. For example, one notion underlying such a belief is that primitives inhabit a world that is timeless and unchanging. Perlman has correctly identified history as His-Story, the story of dominance and control that is the narrative of history. Clearly, lacking Leviathanic structures, primitives do not inhabit this kind of chronology. But on the other hand the notion that primitives live in a timeless vacuum, a perpetual state of changelessness, denies them the ability to develop. And this notion has historically been used to characterize primitives as eternally backward and hence in need of Western intervention to progress. So notions of the primitive as timeless have been and are used as a justification for imperialism and the eradication of the primitive.

Moreover, another implication of this conception of the primitive is that history is linear and that no other ways of conceptualizing or experiencing time are legitimate. And thus the whole ideology of progress is also latent within conceptualizations of the primitive as source and origin. Furthermore, the Western notion of the primitive as origin, and the resulting desire to journey 'back' to the primitive, is based on an idyllic image of the primitive as a site characterized by simplicity and freedom from troubling differences. Torgovnick states this well when she notes:

other and with their natural surroundings, both of which they knew intimately ... Reduced to its most basic elements, discussion about the future sensibly should be predicated on what we desire socially and from that determine what technology is possible. 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."

Anarcho-primitivism is a label and an inadequate label at that. It is more easily described than appropriately named. It includes a refusal of ideology and the racket of politics with all its power-seeking strategies. It is a process, a process of renewal and recovery. It is a mode of thought and action, a world-view, a mode of being in the sense that Hakim Bey has defined ontological anarchy. It is a refusal to go primitive, but an affirmation of the need to become primitive again.

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human meaning, and hence solidarity, by simulating it with technology. Underlying all struggles for freedom is this central necessity: to regain a truly human discourse grounded in autonomous, intersubjective mutuality and closely associated with the natural world.”

Reconnecting the roots of anarchy and its present expression, always from a perspective sensitive to issues of power, remains at the heart of the anarcho-primitivist project. For, in attempting a provisional definition of anarcho-primitivism, it is always necessary to contrast it with what it is not, and in particular against the backdrop of other forms of Western primitivism. These latter may desire a sentimental return to nature or a going ‘back,’ but this is not the case with anarcho-primitivism, as *Fifth Estate* indicated in 1979:

“Let us anticipate the critics who would accuse us of wanting to go ‘back to the caves’ or of mere posturing in our part — i.e., enjoying the comforts of civilization all the while being its hardest critics. We are not posing the Stone Age a model for our Utopia, nor are we suggesting a return to gathering and hunting as a means for our livelihood. Rather, our investigation into pre-civilized modes combats the notion that humans have always lived with alarm clocks and factories. It assails the prevalent amnesia which the species exhibits as to its origins and the varieties of social association which existed for tens of thousands of years before the rise of the state. It announces that work has not always been the touchstone of human existence, and that cities and factories did not always blight the terrain. It asserts that there was a time when people lived in harmony with each

“The primitive’s magical ability to dissolve differences depends on an illusion of time and sense in which the primitive is both eternally past and eternally present. For the charm to work, the primitive must represent a common past — our past, a Euro-American past so long gone that we can find no traces of it in Western spaces. But the primitive must be eternally present in other spaces — the spaces of primitive peoples. Otherwise we cannot get to it, cannot find the magical spot where differences dissolve and harmony and rest prevail. The illusion depends on denying primitive societies ‘pasts’ of their own, their own original states and development (perhaps wholly different from ours) ... If we imagine primitive societies as occupying linear time with us, but as developing in ways of their own to their present state, then they could not be our origin; there would be no time and place for us to ‘go home’ to.” (p. 187)

Conventional Western primitivism always draws the distinction between self and other, between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ And in this schema, the primitive is always other, always ‘them.’ The primitive must always be long ago or far away, not right here and right now. Time must render ‘our’ primitive past inaccessible, while space must make ‘their’ primitive present distant but accessible — journeyable — so that we can find the path back to ‘our’ lost origins. In the process, of course, ‘their’ specificity is lost, merely becoming an image of the idyll that ‘we’ have tragically lost, or of the horrible savagery ‘we’ have thankfully overcome. Such primitivism is all about ‘us’ and serves to efface the primitive in ways that are quite compatible with civilization’s eradication of primitive peoples and lifeways. So the notion of the primitive as origin and source needs to be rejected by a

primitivism that aims for a radical departure from the Western megamachine.

“To discard the idea of the primitive as ‘origin’ requires radical measures,” Torgovnick says. (p. 186) And it is these radical measures that anarcho-primitivism is prepared to make. Indeed, the readiness to take these measures constitutes one — but only one — of the many features which distinguish anarcho-primitivism from other forms of Western primitivism. Hence, Perlman’s prioritization of affirming the primitive as part of the here and now. For Perlman, as for other mainstream primitivists, civilization is just a veneer that is thinly spread over the surface of the civilized individual. But whereas reactionary primitivists regard the primitive as being characterized by savagery, Perlman sees it as characterized by abundance and possession — and not least by possession of a rich inner life and sense of being. So for him the primitive, in civilized conditions, is always a potential — a potential whose bursting out is always a promise of joy and freedom. The primitive, in such a context, is encased — bound and shackled — but always capable of breaking out. And so the primitive, rather than something that has to be journeyed to, emerges as something that one has to come back to. Something that is rediscovered, rather than discovered. This is an insight that Ursula Le Guin comes to in an essentially anarcho-primitivist fiction when which she entitles, not ‘going primitive’ or ‘going home,’ but *Always Coming Home*. The primitive, for those trapped in civilization, is a process, a process of renewal and return. A return to roots, but ‘our’ roots as they are now, in all their presence and sense of possibility, rather than some impossible search for origins.

In this sense too, anarcho-primitivism differs radically from other forms of Western primitivism. In a 1986 position paper entitled “Renew the Earthly Paradise,” the participants of the *Fifth Estate* project outlined their ideological trajectory:

“The evolution of the *FE* has been characterized by a willingness to re-examine all the assumptions of radical criticism, which has led it away from its earlier libertarian communist perspective toward a more critical analysis of the technological structure of western civilization, combined with a reappraisal of the indigenous world and the character of primitive and original communities. In this sense we are primitivists ...”

The two-fold nature of the project outlined here remains crucial. Anarcho-primitivism crucially combines critical analysis of civilization with a reappraisal of the primitive. These two reciprocally related aspects of anarcho-primitivism are essential. One without the other remains disastrous. For anarcho-primitivism does not seek to replicate primitive lifeways. It reappraises the primitive and seeks to draw inspiration from it, but only insofar as it does not contradict the most far-reaching anarchist analysis — analyses which seek an exponential exposure of power relations in whatever form they take.

Pointing to ‘an emerging synthesis of postmodern anarchy and the primitive (in the sense of the original), Earth-based ecstatic vision,’ the *Fifth Estate* circle indicate:

“We are not anarchists per se, but pro-anarchy, which is for us a living, integral experience, incommensurate with Power and resisting all ideology ... Our work on the *FE* as a project explores possibilities for our own participation in this movement, but also works to rediscover the primitive roots of anarchy as well as to document its current expression. Simultaneously, we examine the evolution of Power in our midst in order to suggest new terrains for contestations and critique in order to undermine the present tyranny of modern totalitarian discourse — that hyperreality that destroys