

The Poverty of Primitivism

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In “The Joy of Revolution” (1997) I devoted a brief section to criticizing some current technophobic and primitivist notions, because it seemed to me that these notions were becoming so widespread and so delirious that they were obscuring more serious radical possibilities. This text aroused a number of hostile reactions, from John Zerzan and *Fifth Estate* among others. Further debate was stirred up when an anarcho-primitivist named John Filiss posted the text on his Internet “Anarchy Board,” interspersed with his own comments. Another anarchist signing himself “Raycun” made some pertinent criticisms of Filiss’s comments. When Raycun persisted in challenging Filiss’s illogicalities and evasions, Filiss solved the problem by banning him from his board!

This suppression of practically the only voice of sanity at the board naturally put an end to any thought I might have had about taking part in the discussion. But since Filiss did make a more extensive public response than any other technophobes have proved capable of doing, this may be a convenient framework in which to clarify some of the issues I addressed.

As you can see if you go to the Anarchy Board and read the whole exchange between Raycun and Filiss (with occasional interventions from a few others), the replies and counterreplies by several people on several topics at once soon become rather confusing. In the interest of clarity I have limited myself to responding to Filiss’s original comments on my text.

The passages from “The Joy of Revolution” are in **boldface**. Filiss’s comments are in *italics*. My responses to him are in ordinary type.

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Present-day automation often does little more than throw some people out of work while intensifying the regimentation of those who remain;

Actually, I understand unemployment is at a thirty year low, unless you mean something else by present day.

It should be clear from the context that I am not referring to the annual ups and downs of unemployment statistics, but to present conditions in general (as contrasted with the possible future society I am describing throughout this chapter).

if any time is actually gained by “labor-saving” devices, it is usually spent in an equally alienated passive consumption. But in a liberated world computers and other modern technologies could be used to eliminate dangerous or boring tasks, freeing everyone to concentrate on more interesting activities.

Presumably computers could perform the calculations necessary for robots to build more computers and robots. :-) Unless you meant dreadful and disagreeable occupations like gardening, fishing, hunting, and gathering berries and herbs. The kind of stuff we call recreation today. :-)

I was talking about eliminating “dangerous or boring tasks,” not activities that people find pleasant.

Disregarding such possibilities, and understandably disgusted by the current misuse of many technologies, some people have come to see “technology” itself as the main problem and advocate a return to a simpler lifestyle. How much simpler is debated — as flaws are discovered in each period, the dividing line keeps getting pushed farther back. Some, considering the Industrial Revolution as the main villain, disseminate computer-printed eulogies of hand craftsmanship. Others, seeing the invention of agriculture as the original sin,

I don't recall having read a primitivist reference to anything as original sin. Where did you get that?

Primitivists do not, of course, actually use that term. My point is that the advent of agriculture (or industrial technology, or whatever their particular bugaboo may be) functions like the Biblical original sin: as a simplistic mythical explanation for the origin of all subsequent problems.

feel we should return to a hunter-gatherer society, though they are not entirely clear about what they have in mind for the present human population which could not be sustained by such an economy.

Like anarchists, primitivists are short on discussions of realization. I too see that as a flaw. If a hunter-gatherer lifestyle were the most desirable one for human beings, it would doubtless take many generations for us to reach that state. And, if it were the most desirable type of life for humans, there should be advantages which accrue to us for moving closer to it. Likewise, the technological lifestyle is hardly an example of stasis ... it is forever pushing us towards a goal of which we can only guess. And we in this society are supposed to focus on the advantages it brings us, advantages which may well be limited to the context of technological society, and not seriously question the general movement of technology itself. To that primitivists take exception, and open a line of inquiry into ways of life outside the technological matrix.

Except for Filiss's admission that primitivists' notions of how their aims might be implemented are rather fuzzy, none of this has any bearing on what I was talking about here. But since he has raised the issue, it should be noted that the force that is constantly “pushing us toward a goal of which we can only guess” is capitalism, which by its very nature must constantly expand or die. Capitalism has developed many technologies, some of them harmful or dangerous, but those technologies don't “move” by themselves. The technology of cheap solar power, for example, has scarcely moved at all because the capitalists have not chosen to subsidize it. Chainsaws do not cut down rain forests, people do; and they do so because they have irresistible economic incentives to do so (whether they be capitalists who stand to make huge profits or workers who have no other way to survive). Until the economic system is abolished, these incentives will continue to overpower any appeals to people to change their “lifestyle.”

Others, not to be outdone, present eloquent arguments proving that the development of language and rational thought was the real origin of our problems.

I'm not sure where you found language and rational thought together described as twin problems in primitivist writing. I assume you mean Zerzan's language essay, right?

Right.

Yet others contend that the whole human race is so incorrigibly evil that it should altruistically extinguish itself in order to save the rest of the global ecosystem.

I think a few deep ecology types speak in those terms. I'm not aware of primitivists who do so.

As I noted at the beginning of the paragraph, there are different types or degrees of technophobia (some call themselves primitivists, for example, while others reject that label). Part of my aim in writing this text was to force these differences into the open, so that each type would feel obliged to publicly dissociate itself from the absurdities of the other types.

These fantasies contain so many obvious self-contradictions that it is hardly necessary to criticize them in any detail. They have questionable relevance to actual past societies and virtually no relevance to present possibilities.

Unless you're interested in freedom, as primitive societies are the only known examples of stable anarchist societies; and also interested in escaping the technological nightmare we appear to be facing, with the coming of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, cloning and genetic engineering. But maybe you have a more positive take on these issues. What is your opinion of nanarchy, for example?

The fact that I translated documents defending one of the first destructions of bioengineered plants (France 1998) suggests that I don't have a very positive take on genetic engineering. But this and the other issues Filiss mentions have no bearing on the two points I was making here: that technophobic fantasies have "questionable relevance" to actual primitive societies (in the sense that they present distorted, rose-colored images of them), and more importantly, that they have "virtually no relevance" to present possibilities of radical social change (because we find ourselves in such different conditions from those earlier societies).

Even supposing that life was better in one or another previous era, *we have to begin from where we are now*. Modern technology is so interwoven with all aspects of our life that it could not be abruptly discontinued without causing a global chaos that would wipe out billions of people.

I think you're bringing in your own authoritarian assumptions. I don't recall any primitivist saying that we wished to enforce a particular lifestyle through the barrel of a gun.

Guns have nothing to do with it. The point is that an abrupt breakdown of present technological infrastructures (whether brought about through a natural collapse of the global system or through a hastening of such a collapse by antitech terrorism) would lead to the death of billions of people. If you advocate such a solution, you should be honest enough to admit it and to recognize the consequences:

"When things break down, there is going to be violence and this does raise a question, I don't know if I exactly want to call it a moral question, but the point is that for those who realize the need to do away with the techno-industrial system, if you work for its collapse, in effect you are killing a lot of people. If it collapses, there is going to be social disorder, there is going to be starvation, there aren't going to be any more spare parts or fuel for farm equipment, there won't be any more pesticide or fertilizer on which modern agriculture is dependent. So there isn't going to be enough food to go around, so then what happens? This is something that, as far as I've read, I haven't seen any radicals facing up to" (Ted Kaczynski, in an interview reproduced at Filiss's "Primitivism.com" website).

Postrevolutionary people will probably decide to reduce human population and phase out certain industries, but this can't be done overnight.

Where did you see the "overnight" reference in primitivist writing?

Primitivists dodge between two different positions. That most technologies should be abolished within a relatively short period (not literally overnight, of course) is stated or pretty obviously implied in many of their writings. Occasionally, however, when confronted with common-sense objections such as I have made in this text, they may retreat a bit: "Oh, don't be silly. Where did you get such a strange idea? Of course we don't mean that these things could be instantly abolished. That's just a common misunderstanding of our position. We are quite aware that this will take some time. We would never dream of forcing our views on anyone. We are merely trying to change people's perspectives so they will see that we need to move in that direction."

Well, if that is all they mean they should have few objections to the points I have made here and elsewhere in "The Joy of Revolution," since my text is largely concerned with what we might do within the next few years. If Filiss recognizes that it would take "many generations" to move toward a hunter-gatherer society, one might expect him to be interested in examining the practical transitional issues I deal with. (What new forms of popular decisionmaking could most effectively organize the transformation of existing infrastructures and the restoration of nature? How might certain technologies be phased out in such a way as to cause the least harm?) But his flippant dismissal of the practical needs for various technologies that I mention below seems to imply that we could and should immediately abandon those technologies.

We need to seriously consider how we will deal with all the practical problems that will be posed in the interim.

If it ever comes down to such a practical matter, I doubt if the technophobes will really want to eliminate motorized wheelchairs;

We could open a line of inquiry into a way of life that stressed physical ability and awareness, making one far less likely to be paralyzed by accident ... or a way of life without automation, such as cars or factories, making one far less likely to be paralyzed by accident ... or a way of life where people are in better physical health, and less likely to suffer the problems of illnesses like strokes, making them far less likely to be paralyzed by traumas like a blood clot in the brain. Cure is a more difficult proposition, but as far as the nervous system goes, modern allopathic medicine hasn't been very effective as of yet. But to be honest, even I would look to that rather than plugging the convenience of electric wheelchairs.

My point in this paragraph is that even the most fervent technophobes will probably have enough common sense to abandon their dogma if they ever face this kind of practical choice. I do not think that Filiss would really advocate eliminating motorized wheelchairs as long as lots of people needed them, even if he felt, quite rightly, that certain social changes could *reduce* the need for them *in the long term*.

or pull the plug on ingenious computer setups like the one that enables physicist Stephen Hawking to communicate despite being totally paralyzed;

I don't know much about him, or why he's paralyzed.

What difference does it make? Presumably Filiss is poised to respond that whatever it is was caused by civilization. Hawking is afflicted with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis ("Lou Gehrig's disease"). I don't believe anyone yet knows what causes it.

or allow a woman to die in childbirth who could be saved by technical procedures;

Childbirth is pretty routine in primitive societies.

Spoken like a real man. As Raycun put it: "Pretty routine, yeah. Either the mother dies, or she lives with much worse health, or she lives. Either the baby dies, or lives for a little while, or it lives. All pretty routine occurrences." About 500,000 women die in childbirth each year, most of them in the less developed parts of the world.

Imagine that, in a newly postrevolutionary society, a woman is in danger of dying in childbirth unless she has a caesarian operation. Someone says, "Let's call doctor so-and-so. She'll know what to do." Will Filiss step forward and say, "Sorry, you can't do that. My comrades and I have cut the telephone lines so we won't be so dominated by technology. Besides, childbirth is pretty routine in primitive societies, so what's the problem? She probably should have taken some herbs or something. In any case, if some sort of operation is needed, it should be done with stone implements — precision metal instruments require industrial production, and that's a no-no."

Of course I do not suppose that Filiss or any other primitivist would really respond in that way. But if not, just what would they propose to do?

or accept the reemergence of diseases that used to routinely kill or permanently disable a large percentage of the population;

Like cancer, heart disease, strokes, diabetes, alzheimers ... no, wait, those are diseases which are limited to civilization. :-)

I was obviously not referring to the latter diseases (which are largely provoked by the stresses of capitalist society and are likely to significantly diminish when that society is abolished), but to the many that are not limited to civilization. Some of the more well known ones, such as small-pox or diphtheria, did indeed originate with the domestication of animals and urban population concentration. The fact remains that those diseases now exist, and that primitives are even more susceptible to them than are civilized people (the latter having developed some immunity over the centuries); which is why so many aboriginal populations were decimated upon being exposed to them. (See Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*.)

In any case, there are countless other diseases that have never had anything to do with civilization. "Amebiasis affects 10 percent of the world's population, most of it in the Third World. The population at risk from malaria exceeds 1.2 billion, with an estimated 175 million people actively infected today. African trypanosomiasis (the curse of sleeping sickness) and American trypanosomiasis hold 70 million people at risk, and infect about 20 million right now. Schistomiasis, worldwide, afflicts no fewer than 200 million people; filariasis and leishmaniasis 250 million; hookworm 800 million; onchocerciasis, a common cause of blindness in the tropics, 20 million" (Lewis Thomas, *The Fragile Species*). These and other maladies have afflicted primitive peoples for thousands of years, and in all that time no "natural healers" or "natural remedies" have succeeded in stopping them. Most can be routinely cured by modern medicine.

or resign themselves to never visiting or communicating with people in other parts of the world unless they're within walking distance;

Beats writing letters and e-mail. :-)

In-person encounters are of course nicer in many ways than long-distance communication. Does that mean we can't have both? At the risk of stating the obvious, Filiss is making these very remarks on an Internet discussion board, which is enabling him and other like-minded people around the world to link up with each other and spread primitivist propaganda to their hearts' content. I'm not saying that this is necessarily hypocritical — it may be reasonable to temporarily use certain methods even if you ultimately hope to eliminate them. Nevertheless, there comes a point when the gap between the ideology and the reality becomes rather amusing. When I

see these folks so glibly pontificating over the Net about the evils of technology and the joys of primitive life, I wonder how many of them would last a week if they were suddenly stranded in the wilderness.

or stand by while people die in famines that could be averted through global food shipments.

Why are they dying in famines? What is the context?

Who cares? Present-day famines are indeed largely caused by neocolonialist domination and would *eventually* disappear if the world was radically reorganized. The point is, what do the primitivists envision doing in the meantime if they insist on abolishing telecommunications and transportation technology?

The problem is that meanwhile this increasingly fashionable ideology deflects attention from real problems and possibilities. A simplistic Manichean dualism (nature is Good, technology is Bad) enables people to ignore complex historical and dialectical processes; it's so much easier to blame everything on some primordial evil, some sort of devil or original sin.

Evil, devil, and sin, huh? I think you're laying on your own dualism here. I'm not responsible for every word that Zerzan, Perlman, Moore, et al write, but I don't recall them using those words to describe what Zerzan has called "a wrong turn." A "wrong turn" is far less reflective of an incommensurable aspect of our world than the terms you bring up are or usually are.

As noted above, primitivists obviously don't use those actual terms (though their diatribes against "Leviathan" or "the Megamachine" are sometimes almost reminiscent of a preacher denouncing the devil). The point here is that the crude, undialectical Good-Bad dualism which is obvious in virtually all primitivist writings replaces any serious objective analysis.

What begins as a valid questioning of excessive faith in science and technology ends up as a desperate and even less justified faith in the return of a primeval paradise, accompanied by a failure to engage the present system in any but an abstract, apocalyptic way.*

If your point is to question the validity of belief by disparaging faith, I agree with you. To single out primitivists for this failing is unwarranted. Unlike, say, the Situationists' Marxism, we actually have examples from history and pre-history of a way of life which is in at least some respects desirable. And it is these examples, among other things, on which we base our body of theory.

All sorts of past societies were "in at least some respects desirable" (as well as being undesirable in others). The point is to determine which aspects can be most appropriately adapted to our own situation. If revolutionary theory cannot point to any "stable" examples from the past, this is because movements that threaten the existing order have always been quickly repressed. But we can see some hints, within ourselves and in a few brief radical situations, of what might be possible. If we had to "actually have examples" of whatever we aimed at, we would never arrive at anything new.

Technophiles and technophobes are united in treating technology in isolation from other social factors, differing only in their equally simplistic conclusions that new technologies are automatically empowering or automatically alienating.

You know, I'm really looking forward to a critique of primitivism from someone who has actually read our literature. That is why I was a little disappointed at Jason for being somewhat rude to Ron Leighton bringing up a very valid criticism/question of primitivism and realization, and doing so in a friendly and open way. Here it's not so much that Ken is being rude, but it's become more and more apparent that he is not engaging in any of the areas that we have been discussing for I don't know how long. I'm giving him the courtesy of a point by point dissection of his critique, but I have

yet to read a quote of ours, for example. Rather than giving us this mainstream fare, what if he had actually focused on some technology critic's discussion of why technology isn't neutral? Here is a direct question of mine to Zerzan on the topic:

Q: "Your response to the usual claim that technology is neutral."

A: "Technology has never been neutral, like some discreet 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."

Or he could have pulled quotes from Ellul, Sale, or whomever, and then pointed out why he felt those arguments were incorrect. Even Bookchin had the courtesy of quoting us.

Well, if we focus on the very passage that Filiss gives us, we find that Zerzan falls into the common confusion between "neutral" and "separable from society." When people say that technology is neutral, they mean that most technologies are not inherently good or bad, it depends how they're used (a murderer can use a knife to kill you, a surgeon can use it to save your life). When technophobes declare that technology is *not* neutral, they mean that technologies are inherently bad and cannot be put to good uses (or at least that any good use is inevitably outweighed by bad side-effects). That is, in effect they are saying that technology *is* separable from society, because it is bad regardless of the society. But Zerzan also states that technology "always partakes of and expresses the basic values of the social system in which it is embedded." If this is true, then technology is *not* inherently bad: a liberated, nonexploitive society will naturally create liberating, nonexploitive technologies, just as the present alienated social system naturally produces alienated forms (or uses) of technology.

As long as capitalism alienates all human productions into autonomous ends that escape the control of their creators, technologies will share in that alienation and will be used to reinforce it.

I'd like to know what this means apart from Marxist mystification. Or how any insight it offers could be consistently applied in a technological society.

It's basically another way of putting what I just said: If you have a system (capitalism) that alienates everything, it will naturally produce alienated forms of technology and it will orient those technologies so as to reinforce itself.

But when people free themselves from this domination, they will have no trouble rejecting those technologies that are harmful while adapting others to beneficial uses.

Certain technologies — nuclear power is the most obvious example — are indeed so insanely dangerous that they will no doubt be brought to a prompt halt. Many other industries which produce absurd, obsolete or superfluous commodities will, of course, cease automatically with the disappearance of their commercial rationales. But many technologies (electricity, metallurgy, refrigeration, plumbing, printing, recording, photography, telecommunications, tools, textiles, sewing machines, agricultural equipment, surgical instruments, anesthetics, antibiotics, among dozens of other examples that will come to mind), however they may presently be misused, have few if any *inherent* drawbacks.

Well, except that it takes work to create these items, and often to use these items, and we are all looking for life without dead time, aren't we?

Yes, it takes some "work" to create them, but such work doesn't necessarily have to be wage labor. A life without dead time does not mean a life where you never have to move a muscle or use your head. See the section "Transforming Work into Play."

It's simply a matter of using them more sensibly, bringing them under popular control,

Explain. What is popular control?

More or less what practically all anarchists (until the advent of anarcho-primitivism) envisaged. The rest of the "Joy of Revolution" chapter goes into considerable detail about various possibilities of liberated social organization.

introducing a few ecological improvements, and redesigning them for human rather than capitalistic ends.

The difference being...? How are capitalist ends different from human ends in the context of industrial production? And how could human ends, as opposed to capitalist ends, be realized in the context of industrial production?

Capitalist ends are such things as greater profits and increased control over the workers by the owners. Human ends are such things as people deciding what they need or what they want to do and working out among themselves whatever seem to be the most pleasant and effective ways to achieve those aims (including selecting, rejecting or modifying whatever technological potentials are available).

Other technologies are more problematic. They will still be needed to some extent, but their harmful and irrational aspects will be phased out, usually by attrition. If one considers the automobile industry as a whole, including its vast infrastructure (factories, streets, highways, gas stations, oil wells) and all its inconveniences and hidden costs (traffic jams, parking, repairs, insurance, accidents, pollution, urban destruction), it is clear that any number of alternative methods would be preferable. The fact remains that this infrastructure is already there. The new society will thus undoubtedly continue to use existing automobiles and trucks for a few years, while concentrating on developing more sensible modes of transportation to gradually replace them as they wear out. Personal vehicles with nonpolluting engines

What non-polluting engines? Explain.

Engines that don't pollute. Of the sort that are being developed even now, and that would have been developed long ago if it weren't for the resistance of oil companies, auto companies and other entrenched economic interests.

might continue indefinitely in rural areas, but most present-day urban traffic (with a few exceptions such as delivery trucks, fire engines, ambulances, and taxis for disabled people) could be superseded by various forms of public transit, enabling many freeways and streets to be converted to parks, gardens, plazas and bike paths. Airplanes will be retained for inter-continental travel (rationed if necessary)

RATIONED??? Rationed by whom?

By the people. Like when a dozen friends get together for dinner and there are just twelve pieces of pie, they jointly agree to "ration" themselves to one piece each; whereas on some other occasion when there are lots of pies available everyone can have as much as they want.

and for certain kinds of urgent shipments, but the elimination of wage labor will leave people with time for more leisurely modes of travel — boats, trains, biking, hiking.

Boats — built by whom? Trains — built by whom? Bikes — built by whom? Since people are not now wage laborers, what is their motivation for making these things?

As I have noted elsewhere, “It is strange to find myself having to explain basic anarchist positions to anarchists. When asked how an anarchist society would work, anarchists have always replied that once people are freed from political and economic repression they will have a strong tendency to voluntarily cooperate in order to take care of whatever needs doing; and that they are likely to be far more creative in resolving any difficulties that may remain. The anarcho-technophobes seem to have abandoned this belief... If some things are *now* produced in an alienated way (under conditions of capitalist exploitation), [they seem] to find it inconceivable that liberated people might notice the problem and figure out some different, more sensible and pleasant way to manage (e.g. by producing fewer of them, modifying them so they’re easier to make and repair, automating most of the labor, and sharing the remaining necessary tasks more equitably)” (“A Look at Some of the Reactions to *Public Secrets*”).

Here, as in other areas, it will be up to the people involved to experiment with different possibilities to see what works best. Once people are able to determine the aims and conditions of their own work, they will naturally come up with all sorts of ideas that will make that work briefer, safer and more pleasant;

At least partially fantasy. Capitalism already rewards making work briefer, as this enhances productivity. Safer often or usually means REDUCING productivity, so what do you want? More pleasant? Doubtless things could be done to make the workplace more pleasant, but production has its own exigencies. You can only make a workline SO fun.

I don’t claim that life would be 100% fun all the time (though it would undoubtedly be much more pleasant than it is now). It would be up to the people involved to decide how they want to balance among different priorities — safety, productivity, fun, etc. Nor would they all have to decide in the same way. Different communities and different regions would choose different priorities and different lifestyles (no doubt including various types of neoprimitivism) and people would gravitate to the ones they found most congenial.

and such ideas, no longer patented or jealously guarded as “business secrets,”

Interesting. So you’re saying that these methods have productive value, and are recognized as such by employers. So why would their implementation be more likely in your ideal society than in our own?

A capitalist company has an incentive to keep such methods secret (or to patent them) so that it can maintain a monopoly and keep its prices high. In a noncapitalist society, where no one would have any economic interest in such monopolization, everyone would benefit by promoting the maximum openness of ideas and information, so as to enhance everyone’s skills and creativity, so that any necessary tasks would be shared around as widely and effectively as possible.

will rapidly spread and inspire further improvements. With the elimination of commercial motives, people will also be able to give appropriate weight to social and environmental factors along with purely quantitative labor-time considerations.

In other words, other factors will creep in which will ultimately reduce productivity.

Yes.

If, say, production of computers currently involves some sweatshop labor or causes some pollution (though far less than classic “smokestack” industries),

I don’t know much about the polluting or non-polluting aspects of advanced industries like CPU manufacture. It certainly costs enough to build their fabs. Going rate is well over a billion dollars. And

those costs reflect both enormous amounts of labor at some level, along with activity which creates pollution at some levels, whether or not the fab itself is producing substantial amounts of waste. Because this is not direct pollution of a type we are used to measuring, or can be easily measured, we may be less aware of it, but it does exist.

The fact that certain items are now made in a certain way does not mean that's the only way they can be produced. As I go on to say:

there's no reason to believe that better methods cannot be figured out once people set their minds to it – very likely precisely through a judicious use of computer automation.

There are already rewards for this in our society. Companies like Ford, IBM, and many others push for worker input to increase productivity. And reward for that input.

So what?

(Fortunately, the more repetitive the job, the easier it usually is to automate.)

The general rule will be to simplify basic manufactures in ways that facilitate optimum flexibility. Techniques will be made more uniform and understandable, so that people with a minimal general training will be able to carry out construction, repairs, alterations and other operations that formerly required specialized training.

When this tendency pushes against productivity, what will you opt for? At different times, different technologies develop and are implemented in different ways. Often technologies become extremely complex, and the input of a specialized technician is required. E.g., RAM sticks aren't made with tinker toys. On the other hand, businesses would prefer a more modular approach where possible to save themselves the cost and hassle of employees with specialized knowledge, so that tendency is already inherent in capitalism. How would your ideal society bring out this tendency further, and how much more can it do so?

Capitalists and bureaucrats opt for one solution or another (whether more modular or more complex) depending on which alternative increases their profits or their power, whereas people in a liberated society would decide based on factors such as convenience, fairness, safety and fun.

Incidentally the society I describe in "The Joy of Revolution" is not my "ideal society" (in the sense of being the most perfect society I can imagine). It is a society that I believe to be reasonably possible for fallible human beings to create within a relatively short time, beginning from present conditions, and that would be flexible and pluralistic enough to accommodate a wide variety of tastes and temperaments.

Basic tools, appliances, raw materials, machine parts and architectural modules will probably be standardized and mass-produced, leaving tailor-made refinements to small-scale "cottage industries" and the final and potentially most creative aspects to the individual users.

I thought most of these items were already largely standardized and mass produced. I don't think you're implying that a typical screwdriver in modern times was built by a smith from a hunk of iron. So what are you implying?

Under the present system basic products are only erratically standardized (many irrational brand differences remain), while the "refinements" are often inappropriately standardized (to maximize profits), forcing people to choose from a limited number of models determined by the big companies. In a liberated society, people would probably decide that mass production was the best way to provide everyone with certain basic needs, while leaving other aspects to people's diverse initiatives. For example, few people would want to go to the trouble of spinning and weaving their own cloth – this is the sort of thing that it makes sense to mass-produce in a few

factories that could be almost totally automated — but many people might want to take that cloth and design their own clothes to their own taste.

Once time is no longer money we may, as William Morris hoped, see a revival of elaborate “labor”-intensive arts and crafts: joyful making and giving by people who care about their creations and the people for whom they are destined.

Time may no longer be money if you have some other media of exchange (although I suspect you are talking about the equivalent of money under another name), but productivity reflects productive output. And I’m not seeing how you are going to substantially increase the former.

Total productivity would not need to be increased. People would produce more of certain useful items (e.g. homes for everyone) while ceasing to produce a much larger number of things that are now produced simply to make profits or to reinforce the system (e.g. prisons, bombs, banks, ads, and all sorts of junk commodities).

As for the money question, instead of “suspecting” what I mean, it might be more illuminating to read the section where I discuss it (“Abolishing Money”).

Some communities might choose to retain a fair amount of (ecologically sanitized) heavy technology; others might opt for simpler lifestyles, though backed up by technical means to facilitate that simplicity or for emergencies. Solar-powered generators and satellite-linked telecommunications, for example, would enable people to live off in the woods with no need for power and telephone lines. If earth-based solar power and other renewable energy sources proved insufficient, immense solar receptors in orbit could beam down a virtually unlimited amount of pollution-free energy.

And we would have carburetors that would allow 200 mpg, and lightbulbs that lasted 100 years, and ... There are serious technical challenges to putting immense solar receptors in space, Ken. I don’t know how far we are from this being a wise return on investment rather than just putting solar collectors in the desert. And what would the energy needs be of a society which can efficiently produce and launch into orbit huge solar panels? And why would this be more likely to take place in your ideal society rather than the present one?

Because in the present society solar power and other renewable energy sources conflict with the established capitalists’ profits, and their development is therefore resisted.

Actually, I suspect that earth-based sources would suffice to fill the needs of the society I envisage; I merely mentioned orbiting receptors as one of many possibilities if they did not. In any case, “serious technical challenges” have a way of dissipating a lot faster than anyone expects.

Most Third World regions, incidentally, lie in the sun belt where solar power can be most effective. Though their poverty will present some initial difficulties, their traditions of co-operative self-sufficiency plus the fact that they are not encumbered with obsolete industrial infrastructures may give them some compensating advantages when it comes to creating new, ecologically appropriate structures.

This is a common misunderstanding of economics. There isn’t much in the way of an advantage for having no industrial infrastructures versus having older industrial infrastructures. At some point the returns would be such that they could simply build new industrial infrastructures.

I was not claiming that underdeveloped regions are in a favorable position; I was simply noting that in a liberated social order they might have some advantages to help compensate for their initial disadvantages.

By drawing *selectively* on the developed regions for whatever information and technologies they themselves decide they need, they will be able to skip the horrible “classic” stage

of industrialization and capital accumulation and proceed directly to postcapitalist forms of social organization.

How? By using goods and products that they opt not to make for fear of environmental damage? To some limited extent, this is how the Western countries operate.

No. By using products and information that they would not themselves have been capable of developing without having first passed through the “classic” stage. Under the present social system the industrialized countries take advantage of their development to foist commodities on Third World countries and keep them dependent on the global economy. With the abolition of that system, people in underdeveloped regions will be able to adopt whatever they find useful and reject whatever they feel is not useful, instead of being forced to buy and borrow at the capitalists’ bidding. For example, they could quickly set up wireless communications networks without having had to pass through the clumsy, ugly wired stage that the advanced countries did.

Nor will the influence necessarily be all one way: some of the most advanced social experimentation in history was carried out during the Spanish revolution by illiterate peasants living under virtually Third World conditions.

Some controversy on that score, Ken. Here’s a link www.jim.com/cat/blood.htm.

The link Filiss recommends is a right-wing libertarian website which retails a few biased atrocity stories and concludes that the Spanish anarchists were too “socialist” because they interfered with the free market. (A detailed refutation of this sort of thing can be found at anarchism.pageabode.com and anarchism.pageabode.com.) Granting that the Spanish revolution had its shortcomings, anarchists and other revolutionaries have always with good reason held it up as probably the single richest example of the potentials of autonomous popular creativity. The fact that anarcho-primitivists are now often seen disparaging it is an indication of how far they have drifted from any serious consideration of revolutionary possibilities.

Elsewhere on the Anarchy Board Filiss posted an article by another primitivist, John Moore, which includes the following passage: “Chomsky’s proud declaration that during the Spanish Revolution ‘production continued effectively’ becomes a profound indictment, and an indication that liberation has not been achieved. In an authentic anarchy, factories would be closed or totally reconstituted, technological production would be abandoned or radically transformed.” In a debate that followed, Filiss claimed that this did not mean that Moore was insisting that people must immediately abandon technological production. But if not, why is it a “profound indictment” that the Spanish workers did not do so? Would Moore and Filiss have urged those workers to stop producing the necessities of life or the weapons and ammunition that were so desperately needed in the war against the fascists? If not, just what sort of “radical transformation” do they have in mind?

Nor will people in developed regions need to accept a drab transitional period of “lowered expectations” in order to enable less developed regions to catch up. This common misconception stems from the false assumption that most present-day products are desirable and necessary — implying that more for others means less for ourselves. In reality, a revolution in the developed countries will immediately supersede so many absurd commodities and concerns that even if supplies of certain goods and services are temporarily reduced, people will still be better off than they are now even in material terms (in addition to being far better off in “spiritual” terms).

You have to be more clear about what you’re talking about. Give examples, for instance.

Once their own immediate problems are taken care of,
Which problems and how?

There are dozens of examples throughout the rest of the chapter. Filiss does not seem to have bothered to look at any of the rest of “The Joy of Revolution,” of which the section being discussed here is merely a small part.

many of them will enthusiastically assist less fortunate people. But this assistance will be voluntary, and most of it will not entail any serious self-sacrifice. To donate labor or building materials or architectural know-how so that others can build homes for themselves, for example, will not require dismantling one’s own home. The potential richness of modern society consists not only of material goods, but of knowledge, ideas, techniques, inventiveness, enthusiasm, compassion, and other qualities that are actually *increased* by being shared around.

More clarity that people would want to do things like this. You might be on to something, as in past eras people would help neighbors do things like build homes, but that is before television and when building homes was much simpler (no electricity, no indoor plumbing). People were closer to their communities, and ... oh, wait, it is actually getting closer to ways of life highly thought of by primitivists. :-)

Why wouldn’t people want to? It’s satisfying to help others and gratifying to be appreciated for doing so. There’s nothing obscure about what I’m “on to” — it’s the same sort of natural tendencies toward cooperation and mutual aid that have been evoked by Kropotkin and other anarchists for over a century. There’s no reason to believe that people who know about plumbing or electricity or any other useful technology will be any less generous in sharing their skills than people in previous centuries.

[Footnote] *Fredy Perlman, author of one of the most sweeping expressions of this tendency, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* (Black and Red, 1983), provided his own best critique in his earlier book about C. Wright Mills, *The Incoherence of the Intellectual* (Black and Red, 1970): “Yet even though Mills rejects the passivity with which men accept their own fragmentation, he no longer struggles against it. The coherent self-determined man becomes an exotic creature who lived in a distant past and in extremely different material circumstances... The main drift is no longer the program of the right which can be opposed by the program of the left; it is now an external spectacle which follows its course like a disease... The rift between theory and practice, thought and action, widens; political ideals can no longer be translated into practical projects.”

I would suggest that deepening the critique as Perlman and others have done is a necessary part of getting any clear idea of what actions to take. But as I said earlier, I would agree that there is far too little discussion of realization in primitivist thought.

It seems to me that if the primitivists have shied away from discussing how their ideal might be realized, this is because they sense that it can’t be. The ludicrous pretension that “primitivist thought” is “deepening the critique” masks the fact that primitivism has actually retreated from serious social critique, substituting an exotic idyll for any strategical analysis of present possibilities. Far from fostering a “clear idea of what actions to take,” it tends, like all ideologies, to reinforce the existing system by encouraging passivity, confusion and separation. Which is why its partisans — who in most cases know nothing about capitalism but a few trendy slogans and even less about how it might be superseded — can only oscillate between a delirious rhetorical extremism and the most innocuous eco-reformist practices.

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Ken Knabb
The Poverty of Primitivism
2001

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