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“The Future in the Past”: Anarcho-primitivism and the Critique of Civilization Today

Chamsy el-Ojeili and Dylan Taylor

This essay examines the core ideas and contemporary relevance of anarcho-primitivism, a current of ultra-leftist thought that flourished between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s. The influences of anarcho-primitivism can be traced to periods from the late nineteenth century to the Great War and from 1945 to the mid 1960s, with challenges to conventional leftism issued by thinkers such as Jacques Camatte. In place of a narrow criticism of capitalism and the modern state, anarcho-primitivism offers a wide-ranging critique of civilization. The utopian complement to this critique is to advocate a “future primitive” mode of being, reconciling with nature and reestablishing community. After considering critical issues with anarcho-primitivism, this essay examines how its themes have reappeared in more recent critical thought—as seen in the work of Derrick Jensen and Timothy Morton—and how these themes continue to raise important challenges against a hegemonic liberalism that emphasizes growth, competition, and individualism.

Key Words: Critical Theory, Environment, Ideology, Left Politics, Radical Social Theory

In a 1986 issue, the group around the Detroit-based paper *Fifth Estate* wrote of their effort to develop a “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” (Moore, n.d.). *Fifth Estate*, alongside papers and journals such as *Green Anarchy*, *Species Traitor*, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, and *Green Anarchist*, as well as intellectuals such as Jacques Camatte, Fredy Perlman, John Zerzan, John Moore, and David Watson (aka, George Bradford), are part of an intellectual-political current variously known as civilization critique, green anarchism, primitivism, neo-primitivism, and anarcho-primitivism. This current flourished most in the period between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s and was subsequently encompassed and partially eclipsed by the anarchist-leaning alternative-globalization current. While anarcho-primitivist thinkers are marginal figures today, the themes they grappled with are as relevant as ever and are being extended by a number of contemporary critical scholars.

In many respects, anarcho-primitivism appears to occupy a position at the most extreme edge of leftist extremisms, with its excoriating though often poetic critique of the entirety of civilization from the Neolithic Revolution onward and with its entirely noncontemporaneous desire for a “future primitive” mode of being. In turning to anarcho-primitivism, we explore a set of stark, recurrent argumentative polarities that function as a critical and utopian constellation of figures and concerns, such as nature/culture, spontaneity/artifice, instinct/science, wholeness/fragmentation, and community/atomization. We analyze these (1) by turning to two predominant generations of influences deployed and synthesized within contemporary anarcho-primitivism and (2) by discussing axiomatic primitivist efforts to separate their position from modernizing leftisms of both anarchist and Marxist variants. We then lay out the anarcho-primitivist depiction of the civilization, Leviathan, or megamachine that they oppose, and we subsequently consider the utopian contestations and contentions posed to this systemic totality. Surveying some of the often brutal, critical responses to anarcho-primitivism, we nonetheless suggest the relevance of certain dimensions of the primitivist case and trace these dimensions through the work of some contemporary scholars on the left.

Sources of Dissent

A distinctive anarcho-primitivist current emerged in the 1970s, visible in Jacques Camatte’s 1973 essay “The Wandering of Humanity” and in *Fifth Estate*’s reorientation later in that decade (Millett 2004; Moore 1996). Prior to these developments were two major, though somewhat disparate, generations of influences and intellectual interlocutors.¹ The first was located between the late nineteenth century and the Great War and drew on Romantic and counter-Enlightenment critiques of modernity: the celebration of humanity’s creative, intuitive, and emotional capacities; people as artists, rather than workers or consumers; an emphasis on the collective good and strong social bonds; the recognition of the past as living foundation of the present; society as a complex, interdependent, organic whole; nature as vital and irreducible to a series of physical, mechanically functioning objects; and concern with industrialization, urbanization, and the growing pervasiveness of the “cash nexus,” as corroding authentic individuality and community (Gordon 1991; Plant 1974; Rundell 2003; Saiedi 1993; Smith 1997; Swingewood 2000).

1. The search for precursors can go back further than we outline here. Becker (2012, xxvii), for instance, suggests that Diogenes and the cynics expressed and actively lived a “primitivist philosophy,” and he notes that Zerzan locates traces of anarchists of “a primitivist bent” in the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit in the fourteenth century, in the Radical Levellers and Diggers active in the English Revolution, and later with the Luddites. We focus on the nineteenth century in our search for antecedents to anarcho-primitivism. While primitivist currents were present earlier, it was in the nineteenth century, we suggest, that a systematic and explicit rejection of civilization, as tied to capitalism and industrialization, was formulated and activated within various philosophical and activist currents.

Classic sociological thinkers contributed to this line of critique, as seen, for instance, in Tönnies's opposition of *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society), Durkheim's concerns over egoism and anomie, and Weber's critique of rationalization and disenchantment. Marx is a crucial figure here. His early work, of course, is marked by concern for workers' alienation from human essence, the social impact of the division of labor, and the city/country divide, and *The German Ideology* offers a distinctively green, romantic vision of communism—hunting, fishing, shepherding, and critical criticism.

Counter to notions of an epistemological break, aspects of these critical and utopic themes persisted in Marx's work and influenced diverse Marxist currents. Morris's (1946, 601) *News From Nowhere*, for instance, portrays industrial society as an increasingly "uninhabitable desert"—noisy, polluted, ugly—where humans are enslaved by machines. In explaining his "conversion to socialism," Morris states that "apart from my desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation" (657). His vision of socialism finds its referents in the past, in the period between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries (Morris 1994), with calls for an abundance of open spaces, an exit from the age of inventions, and the celebration of craftsmanship and of the workshop as a "school of art" (Morris 1946, 582). In his great utopian novel, Morris imagines a postrevolutionary anthropological transformation of people who become beautiful, graceful, and carefree, without jealousy or acquisitiveness—in a word, innocents.

Morris's "hatred of modern civilization" is admittedly unusual within Marxism. Marxism normally plays the role of modernity's loyal opposition (Therborn 2009), maintaining the dialectical position that capitalist modernity is both progress *and* catastrophe (Jameson 1984). Morris prompts us to challenge the simple opposition commonly erected between Marxism and anarchism on this score. That said, anarchism is more frequently associated with an extended critique of modernity—including the critique of Marxism's submission to modern ills, such as productivism. Clark (1984, 159), for instance, asserts that anarchism has always questioned large-scale, centralized, highly mechanized industry, opposing the Enlightenment belief that liberation might be won through "epistemological-technological triumph over nature."

Clark (2008) perpetuates an anachronism here (reducing Marxism to its orthodox variant), and there is little to support a blanket depiction of anarchism as a champion of golden-age primitivism. Nevertheless, components of the subsequent primitivist current are present in the anarchist tradition. As noted by Marshall (1992), there are a number of conceptual affinities: such as that the best part of human history was pre-state, that the acquisitions of the modern age were evil, and an attachment to spontaneous order (against the artificiality of the state).

More concretely, Proudhon's work enshrines the small-town values of the peasant and artisan (Sonn 1992). In Bakunin's (1973, 123) work, meanwhile, alongside the Promethean contention that humanity must master the natural world,

which involves the “absolute authority” of science, we also find a critique of the belief in the infallible authority of scientists. Both positivists and Marxists (the “scientific socialists”) are viewed as potentially forming a “new privileged scientific and political class” (Bakunin 1990, 181). Against this scientific tendency, Bakunin (1973) espouses a vitalistic elevation of instinct, passion, art, and life, calling for a democratic reformation of science (Thorpe and Welsh 2008).

Different impulses are found in the anarchism of Kropotkin and Landauer. Kropotkin (1975) associates anarchism with the natural sciences—tracing extant anarchistic tendencies within evolution and equating anarchism with inductive natural-scientific methods. Evolutionary propensities toward sociability or mutual aid could be bolstered, he contends, by an anarchistic release of modern technology’s promise (Clark 2008; Kropotkin 1975; Gordon 2009). This anarchist Prometheanism combines with affinities for peasant life and elements of the medieval system—self-administration, guilds, and city organization (Kropotkin 1975; Osofsky 1979).² Landauer likewise looks to peasant traditionalism, art, and artisanal production, combining collectivist, spiritual, and folkish attachments to organic and harmonious community (set against urban and industrial life) with Nietzschean voluntarism, literary Bohemianism, and Romantic individualism (Landauer 1978; Lunn 1973). The Marxism institutionalized at the Erfurt Congress of 1891 was anathema to such thought (Link-Salinger 1977), and Landauer (1978, 54) branded these Marxists as the progeny of steam, as seeking to replace spirit with science: “Scientific swindlers ... cold, hollow, spiritless.” Against Marxism’s progressivism, Landauer depicted his age as one of “deep decay” (65, 54, 136).

We can also delineate a loose, diverse second generation of influences at work in contemporary anarcho-primitivism, appearing after the Second World War and running through to the mid 1960s. The Frankfurt School is important here. Zerzan, for instance, draws on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, alongside Adorno’s (1991) critique of mass consumer culture, pseudoindividuality, inauthenticity, and standardization (see, for instance, Zerzan 1994). Zerzan (2009a) also worked through Benjamin’s (1968, 259) “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” with its images of progress as catastrophe, civilization as barbarism, redemption as a “tiger’s leap into the past,” and its critique of a socialism that “recognises only the progress in the mastery of nature.” Marcuse’s 1964 *One-Dimensional Man* also contains themes congruent with anarcho-primitivism—in particular, the contention that technological advancement domesticates dissent (Gordon 2007).

Another unorthodox Marxian forebear to anarcho-primitivism, central to the pioneering work of Camatte, is Amadeo Bordiga, the first leader of the Italian

2. In this vein, we could also mention the “guild socialism” current—found, for instance, in the journal *New Age* (1904–20)—which focused on the alienating consequences of the division of labor and looked toward the establishment of a more democratic type of small-scale artisanal production (Schecter 1994). This romantic socialism attracted minds such as G. D. H. Cole, Alfred Richard Orage, and Bertrand Russell.

Communist Party. A firm historical materialist, holding that material conditions shape consciousness, Bordiga ([1946] 2003, [1950] 2012) opposed the Soviet Union on the grounds that it was a variety of capitalism. He was also resolutely antiparliamentary and antidemocratic, a position stemming from his rejection of bourgeois individualism. Communism, if realized, would be the “affirmation of social man” (Bordiga [1950] 2012), “the joyous harmony of social man” (Bordiga [1965] 2012). Strikingly, Bordiga ([1951] 2003, [1951] 2013, [1952] 2013, [1953] 2013) wrote a number of pioneering essays in the 1950s on the connection between capitalism and environmental degradation. In these texts Bordiga criticizes the modern obsessions with science, technology, and production. He considers the disasters and chain reactions provoked by the “convulsive dynamic” of “super-capitalism” (for instance, deforestation; see Bordiga [1951] 2013), rejects the “agglomerated monsters” arising from urbanism (Bordiga [1952] 2013), agonizes over the impact of machines on human beings, and critiques the general capitalist neglect of future generations.

A third, more anarchistic strand of influence is found in the work of Anglo-American thinkers such as Herbert Read, Alex Comfort, George Woodcock, and Paul Goodman, all of whom evince a romantic anarchism that stresses authenticity, instinct, the art-life connection, participation, sensuousness, and community (Marshall 1992). In Goodman (1960), for instance, we again encounter critiques of urbanization and technology along with laments for lost community set against participation and self-rule as modeled on the town meeting. Such countercultural themes gained traction in core nations in the 1960s and ’70s, particularly concerns over runaway technology. Here, Jacques Ellul’s 1965 critique of “autonomous technique” as a “cold monster” and Lewis Mumford’s 1967 arguments about the “megamachine” are pertinent—with both frequently cited by primitivist thinkers (Ellul 1965; Millett 2004; Thorpe and Welsh 2008; Watson [1997] 2010; Zerzan [1994] 2009). The ultra-leftist ideas developed or rearticulated in the 1960s—council communism, situationism, and autonomism—have also influenced the development of anarcho-primitivist thought, especially participation, the critique of inauthenticity, and the prioritization of continuous struggle by human beings against capital and atomization (Moore, n.d.; Perlman 1983; Watson [1997] 2009; Zerzan [1994] 2009).

These diverse sources of dissent were combined, in various ways, by the journals and thinkers advancing the anarcho-primitivist project, best viewed as a family of contention, a “highly unstable, non-homogenous composite” (Favilli 2016, vii, x).

Leftist Modernity and Its Discontents

Anarcho-primitivism arose in the 1970s as a response to the perceived failure of other contemporary leftist approaches to adequately question productivism, “progress,” the division of labor, and the seriousness of the environmental crisis (Zerzan [2002] 2009, [2008] 2009). This is important, as the three most notable primitivist thinkers, Perlman (b. 1934), Camatte (b. 1935), and Zerzan (b. 1943),

emerged from the established ultra-leftist milieus of councilism, Bordigism, and autonomism.³

While Camatte's thought was situated in the Bordigist camp for the greater part of the 1960s,⁴ he breaks with this tradition (and Marxism generally) later in the decade over the question of organization. Against the Bordigist emphasis on the party, Camatte (1995, 19) developed a spontaneist and antisubstitutionist line. Just as the state is a "gang" mediating between particular capitals, he asserted, so too have all parties evolved into gangs, including the International Communist Party (to which he had belonged). For Camatte, all forms of authentic working-class political organization had disappeared, replaced by various "rackets" competing for theoretical and organizational prestige. As an "illusory community" (31), the gang merely "replaces all natural or human presuppositions with presuppositions determined by capital" (26–7). This process is linked by Camatte to capital's achievement of "real domination" (26).

Here Camatte draws on Marx's *Grundrisse* and the so-called unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital*, "Results of the Direct Production Process." In these sources, Marx distinguishes between the formal and real subsumption of labor under capital, deploying this distinction as a critique of capital's growing penetration into human existence. For Camatte (1995), real subsumption entails the *domestication* of human beings by capital, the autonomization of the nonliving, and the progressive "capitalization of everything." In this process, capital becomes social, "an animated monster," seizing "all the materiality of man" (106). In short, capital "has become the material community of man" (107).

Breaking with Bordigism on the question of organization, Camatte (1995, 20) rejects all political representation as a "screen" and an "obstacle to a fusion of forces" and insists that emancipation must be self-emancipation based on materialist premises (consciousness follows action). Here, Camatte looks to Marx's reflections on the Communist League, insisting that, at this moment, one can only recognize the party in the *historic* (as opposed to formal) sense: "The revolutionary must not identify himself with a group but recognize himself in a theory that does not depend on a group or on a review, because it is the expression of an existing class struggle ... the desire for theoretical development must realize itself in an autonomous and personal fashion and not by way of a group that sets itself up as a kind of diaphragm between the individual and the theory" (32–3). Camatte's work from the early to mid 1970s, while extending the above themes, argues that

3. We have not discussed the pioneering work of Murray Bookchin, whose essays through the 1960s, collected in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (see Bookchin 1986), chart much of the initial critical and utopian territory here, developing an early green anarchism. Bookchin later came into bitter conflict with deep-ecology activists and primitivists, but much of his critique of leftism is consonant with that developed by anarcho-primitivists. For instance, aspects of what Bookchin says in "Listen, Marxist!" coalesce with elements found in Camatte's work through the late 1960s and early '70s.

4. See el-Ojeili (2014) for a detailed discussion on this point.

capitalism has now overcome the law of value, has been able to absorb crises, and, in a Debordian formulation, contends that capital is today *representation* (39–40, 54). Significantly, capital has finally negated classes through the “universalization of wage labour,” creating a “collection of slaves of capital” (41). It is “humanity that is exploited” (40). Camatte now suggests that the “working class,” as self-conscious collective actor, is inherently reformist: “Doesn’t Lenin’s discredited statement that the proletariat, left to itself, can only attain trade-union consciousness, describe the truth about the class bound to capital?” (58–9). Proletarian struggle leads, progressively, to its integration with capital, and any appeals to parties, councils, or other forms of working-class organization as leading the way to communism are jettisoned as mere “coagulations of despotic consciousness” (57).

Camatte (1995) also depicts the “revolutionary reformism” of the period 1913–45 as a decisive stage in Marxism’s failure. It is implicated in the mid-nineteenth-century-onward “wandering of humanity,” the notion that the “growth of productive forces [is] the condition *sine qua non* for liberation” (54). The convergence of the proletarian movement with the presuppositions of capital is later expanded upon as follows: “The dichotomy of interior/exterior; the vision of progress; the exaltation of science; the necessity of distinguishing human from the animal, with the latter being considered in every case inferior; the idea of the exploitation of nature” (199–200). While Marx’s own works (chiefly the earlier texts) continued to influence Camatte, Marxism was cast as unwittingly implicit in the domestication of humanity (as were other established leftist traditions and movements).

We see similar trajectories in the work of Perlman and Zerzan.⁵ In particular, they continue to extend the conceptualization of power—moving beyond a strictly class-centered approach to develop a broader notion of hierarchy that considers the elevation of the human over other living beings and that encompasses questions of everyday life ignored by more orthodox Marxists and anarchists. This entails, also, the need for new modes of struggle—moving beyond, for instance, party-type organizations (Moore 1996). A significant ontological break takes place here (Aaltola 2010), encompassed in a novel narrative and in “social cosmology” (Therborn 2000), centered on the formation of a system of domination that extends the story of lost innocence and contamination beyond the critiques of modernity found in Marxism and anarchism (Millett 2004; Smith 2002).

5. Perlman encountered Camatte’s work in the early 1970s and translated the latter’s “The Wandering of Humanity” in 1975 (see Perlman 1989). The importance of Camatte’s work is underscored in the early part of Perlman’s (1983) primitivist masterpiece, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, and Perlman’s connection with *Fifth Estate* and other radical groups in Detroit and beyond was likely crucial in the spread of Camatte’s influence. We see Camatte mentioned early on by a number of key primitivist thinkers: Peter Werbe in 1977; in an exchange of letters between John and Paula Zerzan and *Fifth Estate* in 1978; by George Bradford (aka David Watson) in an essay of 1981 (see Brubaker, et al. 2010). More recently, his work has been featured in journals such as *Green Anarchy* and has been cited by Bob Black (1997) as an important influence in primitivist/green anarchist thinking about organization. See also Millett’s (2004) discussion of *Fifth Estate*.

Against the Megamachine

These critical expansions beyond Marxist and anarchist leftism are developed by way of new conceptual totalities: civilization, Leviathan, and the megamachine. There are echoes here of Engels's 1884 *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, where the origins of class society, the state, and gender inequality were located in the fall from primitive communism into settled agriculture. Anarcho-primitivists radicalized this suggestion, introducing a number of crucial shifts in perspective, particularly with respect to questions of technology and nature.

Camatte (1995, 183) initially located humanity's domestication by capital in the period of "organized modernity"—social democracy, communism, fascism. In the 1970s he pushed this periodization back ever further, to a cycle beginning with the Greek polis and ending with the fall of the Roman Empire (184), and then to the advent of animal husbandry in the Neolithic Revolution,⁶ which is presented as a foundational moment for science (as the treatment of the other as object), patriarchy, and capital (237–8). This exteriorization and instrumentalization of nature underpinning humanism and scientism (88) necessitates a radical departure from domination over nature, toward a reconciliation with and regeneration of nature (66). Tied to this line of argumentation is a critique of technology. Camatte rejected the notion that technology is neutral; rather, it is intimately bound to the prevailing mode of production (67).

This critical optic is paired with a series of utopic suggestions for exiting the state of domestication. Urbanization is to be destroyed in favor of multiple dispersed communities. The transportation system is to be diminished. The division of labor is to be changed, "the suppression of monoculture" enacted, and "mad" population growth reversed (Camatte 1995, 66). Further, the "somatic and psychological illnesses of present-day human beings" are to be cured by a "new active and unfixed life" (67). Such transformations are urgent, in part because of the pressures of environmental destruction (92), but also because of the ongoing diminishment of human communal essence in contemporary civilization. The goal of revolution for Camatte is to "re-establish community," which was lost "when ancient communities were destroyed" (71). For Camatte, "What is invariant is the desire to rediscover the lost community, which will not be realized by the recreation of the past but as an act of creation" (179). The past offers the means of conceptualizing a nonalienated, authentic, ecologically sound future.

Similar emphases can be found in Perlman's poetic *Against His-Story, Against the Leviathan!* and in Zerzan's and Watson's works. Zerzan ([1994] 2009) locates the

6. Camatte (1995, 236–7) suggests that we return animals to a state of nature, and he also argues for more natural behavior on a number of fronts—abandoning meat eating, pursuing a fruitarian diet, natural childbirth, and greater amounts of touching between people as "psychogenetically important."

origin of alienation in the rise of civilization. He advances an extremely stringent separation between nature and culture, locating the genesis of domestication and domination not only in settled agriculture but also within culture writ large. Culture is the source of the objectification of the real, of the ordering and manipulation of the wild (Zerzan [1994] 2009, 2009a). Culture is tied by Zerzan to symbolism and any other form of mediation: language, numbers, time, and art. Culture is responsible for fragmentation and separation, the breakdown of wholeness, the end of communion with nature, distance from the immediate, and the division of labor (Zerzan 2009d, 2009e; Aaltola 2010). The earliest writing, for instance, is connected to taxation, law, and terms of labor servitude (Vaden 2008), and the appearance of art, an example being the 20,000-year-old cave painting in Lascaux, France, expresses an “anxiety at being cut off from reality”—the end of a way of life, “a psychological compensation for loss of identity” (Becker 2012, xx–xxi).

Zerzan’s ([1994] 2009) critique of culture is intimately bound to his position on technology. Technology is the “sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of those separations mediating us from each other.” It is another means by which real life is drained from the world and by which people have become infantilized, completely dependent on machines. Much of Zerzan’s (2009a, 2009b, 2009d, 2009e) work builds on this critique, drawing on the Frankfurt School in doing so, to explore the various symptoms of a contemporary “mass psychology of misery” and “hyper-alienation”: stress, loneliness, boredom, anxiety, the shrinking of the soul, and the spread of therapy and psychotropic drugs, which serve to further alienate us from our own experiences.

Suspicion of technology and of the notion of it being (after Elull and Mumford) an independent protagonist is a commonplace of anarcho-primitivism (Gordon 2009). As framed by Millett (2004) in discussing *Fifth Estate*, technology “encloses” all other human activity, promoting rationality and artificiality. This is evoked in Perlman’s notion of “Leviathan” and in the deployment of Mumford’s term “megamachine” by other *Fifth Estate* writers. Here, Watson distinguishes between techniques and technology, the latter as the rationalization or science of techniques. Technology becomes a system, an “autonomous power and social body” (Watson, [1997] 2010, 2). As argued by Moore (n.d.), technology “is the product of large-scale interlocking systems of extraction, production, distribution, and consumption, and such systems gain their own momentum and dynamic.” Far from neutral, technology has its own rationality and mode of being. The automobile, for example, is not simply a tool. It is “the totality of the system,” a “way of life” (Watson [1997] 2010, 6). The technological megamachine, in Watson’s estimation, undermines human independence, community, and freedom. It creates massified human beings, mystification, and control. A special place is reserved by Watson for media technology, due to its contribution to commodification, atomization, and alienation (see also Zerzan [1994] 2009).

In sum, the anarcho-primitivists radicalized and expanded anarchistic critiques of power. Power relations are pervasive, entrenched within all aspects of life. Civilization, as a conceptual object, encompasses state, private property, patriarchy,

war, technology, and power relations generally (Moore 1996). It is associated with abstraction, separation, instrumental rationality, mediation, fragmentation, mastery, hierarchy, objectification, and ordering (Anonymous, n.d.; Perlman 1983; Smith 2007; Zerzan [1994] 2009). Only through dismantling civilization, it is argued, can humans recover an enchanted unity with nature, meaning, dignity, and harmonious community (Bradford 1989).

Elements of Refusal

Since civilization has separated humans from instinct, direct experience, intuition, “wildness,” and “life” (Smith 2007), the dismantling of civilization entails major ontological and epistemological shifts. A total break from the core axioms of modern rationality and science—“civilization’s ally”—is required to enact a reenchanting unification with nature (Perlman 1983; Watson [1997] 2009). For anarcho-primitivists, humanity can achieve a new innocence, spontaneity, or state of grace by moving from abstraction and rootlessness into a multivalent reconnectedness (Davidson 2009; Moore, n.d.; Smith 2002; Watson [1997] 2009). To further explore these notions, we now turn from anarcho-primitivism’s critical diagnostic toward its utopic dimension, as signaled in the “primitivist” side of the anarcho-primitivist equation. It is here that anarcho-primitivists have generated the most scorn, dismissed as a bunch of “flakes and crazies” seeking to turn the clock back and “return to the caves” (Aaltola 2010, 177; Gordon 2007), propagating a Romantic antimodernism detached from both past and present realities.

As indicated earlier, there are socialist precedents for drawing from the past to think the historical actuality and future possibility of living otherwise. The democracy and expansive citizenship of Greek antiquity and the craftsmanship of the Middle Ages provide common referents. Anarcho-primitivism draws us further back, to the period preceding the Neolithic Revolution, to the primitive communism, or original anarchism (Lieberman 2010), of hunter-gatherer modes of life. It offers Edenic narratives influenced by anthropological work on hunter-gatherer and Indigenous social orders (Smith 2002).

As Robinson and Tormey (2012) note, the mobilization of such anthropological work serves four major functions for anarcho-primitivists. The first is critique, demonstrating that capitalist-statist social orders are not natural, universal, or inevitable. Such work denaturalizes the present, indicating other, historically actualized modes of being. Second, this work encourages the utilization of techniques for sustaining stateless relationships, such as consensus forms of decision making or sustainable human interchange with the natural world. Third, anthropological work brings greater reflexivity, the questioning of our preconceptions of “primitive” societies, and it indicates the perils of vanguardist politics. Fourth, this work generates solidarity, particularly with Indigenous peoples and their struggles.

Together these elements indicate that anarchism's future has either a successful past actuality or is "already here"—as present in micro-struggles and alternate ways of being together (Robinson and Tormey 2012).

The anarcho-primitivist emphasis on the past presents difficulties for thinking revolutionary practice and strategy. How exactly would we dismantle civilization? The answer often appears to lie in catastrophism: the path to the "future primitive" passes through capitalist modernity's decadence and imminent environmental collapse (Camatte 1995). In the interim, primitivists champion "living otherwise," creating new modes of life and struggle (Moore 1996; Zerzan 2009c). These modes of life are the inverse of anarcho-primitivism's critique of civilization. Here we see emphases on immediacy, nonhierarchy, community, reconnection, participation, diversity, rewilding, the human scale, and so forth. In an effort to head off critique, the "future primitive," Moore (1996) insists, is without precedent, rather than being a mere return. Or, as Becker (2012, xxvi) suggests, the "future primitive" keeps open "the possibility that some of the advantages of civilization could be integrated into a culture that is guided by the deeper insights of primitive life."⁷ At times, though, primitivism's portrait of our "culture of contamination" appears so total that exit appears impossible (Smith 2002). Zerzan ([1994] 2009), for example, lambasted *Fifth Estate* for constantly appealing to a community that, at present, can only be "negatively" defined.

In the absence of clear strategic deliberation, we are left, seemingly, with two options. The first is essentially eschatological, reliant on notions of decadence, approaching collapse, and awaiting the primitivist messiah. This primitivist messianism coexists with and is conditioned by a variant of capitalocentrism found within some strands of Marxism. A second option is offered by Camatte. Anticipating objections, Camatte (1995, 88) maintained that his position is not fatalistic. And yet it is clear that Camatte's own question—"How can destroyed human beings rebel?" (85)—is difficult to answer following his break from Bordigism and its ability to lean on the party and the working class. Camatte looked for answers

7. Perhaps the greatest literary example of what the "future primitive" might look like can be found in Le Guin's (2016) novel *Always Coming Home*, first published in 1985. This work offers an archaeology of the future whose subject matter is a people named the Kesh, who "might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California" (xiii). The Kesh's way of life and philosophical outlook echoes the precolonial life of the First Peoples of North America. The Kesh recognize the personhood of natural phenomena—animals, rocks, mountains. They live in small villages and have retained some of the technology of the civilization that had inhabited this area before them, thanks to "exchanges" run by an AI ("The City of the Mind") that has separated itself from humanity but who shares previous human knowledge in return for new material. This prior time, the period of civilization, which had excluded "primitive cultures," is referred to by the Kesh as "the time outside" (152–3)—outside nature, including our own nature as a species. A key theme of this work, as encapsulated in its title, is that what currently passes as civilization is an aberration, a historical (ontological) sequence at odds with our past and potential future. In step with the catastrophic themes of the primitivist thinkers treated in this article, Le Guin envisages the culture of the Kesh as arising in the wake of a toxic crash of our current civilization (which includes a dramatic rise in sea level, the toxification of the soil, and widespread conflict).

in the content of the new revolutionary cycle that opened with 1968. The leftist currents reinvigorated in that period were not what he had in mind, however. Instead, Camatte mentioned youth who are not yet fully domesticated and elements of the (third) world that “have not yet fully succumbed to the despotism of capital” (128). The possibility of communism appears, above all, as an existential hope and as an appeal to notions of human essence and refusal. Communism is a “necessity that extends to all people” (124), and “we must abandon this world dominated by capital, which has become a spectacle of beings and things” (170). However, in a world of wandering, domestication, and damaged human material, are we not left with a rather forlorn faith in the individualized, rebellious, purely ethical gestures of *l’homme révolté*, given that there is no clear subject that is materially propelled to become the agent of a transformative movement?

Contemporary Traces

While some figures in the anarcho-primitivist tradition have continued to produce work within this current—see, most notably, Zerzan (2012)—others have moved on. Watson ([1997] 2009), for instance, argued that anarcho-primitivism had become too excessive in its claims and too simplistic in its responses. And as will be seen below, contemporary thinkers like Derrick Jensen and Timothy Morton, who have much in common with this tradition, either take steps to distance themselves from anarcho-primitivism or disavow any connection at all.

While anarcho-primitivism is not, on its own terms, a strong intellectual current today, the issues it grappled with are very much at the fore. The acceleration of climate change, the ubiquity of pharmaceutical antidepressants and tranquilizers, the precarity of the global food supply, a society transfixed by its reflection in the “black mirror,” these are civilizational trends that require robust critique. The writing of Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2009; 2015, 3), for instance, laments the alienation of the “soul” in work, excoriates pharmacological intensification, and asserts that mass shootings in the United States are perpetuated by “the heroes of an age of nihilism and spectacular stupidity.” Capitalism can only promise death, with exodus through temporary autonomous zones, toward communism, the path of escape (Berardi 2011). In a similar vein, the prominent ecofeminist Vandana Shiva (2016)—critical of the Enlightenment’s fixation on scientific knowledge and economic development—calls for a decentralized approach to farming, a return to the small scale and the organic.⁸ She notes that “the partnership between women and biodiversity has kept the world fed throughout history,”

8. We should underline here that, while anarcho-primitivists were critical of the patriarchal nature of civilization, the most prominent thinkers in this tradition were men. Space limitations have prohibited our exploring the commonalities shared between anarcho-primitivism and ecofeminism. d’Eaubonne (1980) was instrumental in opening this field, with her work equating the suppression of women with that of nature by patriarchal Western society.

with small farms and “women-centred, nature-friendly agriculture” set against the “monocultures and monopolies” of patriarchal agriculture (xvi). Similarly, James C. Scott’s (2017) recent work, *Against the Grain*, offers a “deep history” of the state that echoes earlier anarcho-primitivist arguments concerning the destructive qualities of agriculture, urbanism, the rise of the state, and the link between the domestication of nature and the domestication of humanity. Meanwhile, Sherry Turkle’s (2013) ground-breaking research on the relationship of the self to technology paints a picture that confirms the dystopic view of anarcho-primitivists, that our desire to connect with others through technology leads, perversely, to our disconnection and alienation from one another. Separation from each other, from the environment, the misery of Western civilization—unsustainable use of natural resources, runaway technology, the need to return to more “authentic” and localized forms of social interaction—the concerns that animated anarcho-primitivists are as pertinent today as ever.

The work of Jensen draws these concerns together and extends them in a manner consonant with anarcho-primitivism, although he has an ambiguous relationship with this tradition and has distanced himself from the term “primitivism” because it “is a racist way to describe indigenous peoples.” He prefers, instead, the label of “indigenist” because “indigenous peoples have the only sustainable human social organisations” (Jensen, quoted in Blunt 2011).

As with the anarcho-primitivist tradition, hatred of civilization is a persistent theme. Civilization, argues Jensen (2006a, 2006b), is pervaded by dysfunctional and antisocial behaviors, is grounded in violence, and is completely irredeemable. The solution: “We need to bring down civilization now. We need not hesitate any longer. The planet is collapsing before our eyes, and we do nothing” (Jensen 2006b, 657). Given the urgency of the situation, nothing is off the table. The contemporary activist scene is taken to task for its “cult of pacifism”; violence needs to be seen as a legitimate part of any repertoire of resistance (Jensen 2007). But beyond dismantling civilization, where should resistance take us?

Since our culture is based on “human supremacism”—the belief that “humans are separate from and superior to everyone else on the planet” (Jensen 2016, 15)—redemption lies, for Jensen (2011), in rejecting the scientific ontology of the West and learning from Indigenous peoples. Such teachings, for Jensen, lead toward an identification with nature—“Pretend you are the river” (Jensen 2006b, 603)—and the recognition of the intelligence and right-to-be of animals and their “communities” (Jensen 2016). On the back of such conceptual shifts ride more practical ones:

Taking down civilization means acting. It means committing ourselves to defending our landbases, which means committing ourselves to removing the economic and transportation infrastructures, which means committing ourselves to hitting them, and hitting them again, and again, and again ... Once the economic and transportation infrastructures have been taken down, our fights over how to live sustainably in our landbases will be local, and face to face, which means

they will be human, which means they are eminently winnable, through discourse or violence or some other means. (Jensen 2006b, 717)

The dismantling of civilization, reconnection with nature, the return to the local and small scale—here lies, for Jensen, the only hope for life on the planet.

Morton is another thinker whose recent work echoes the anarcho-primitivist tradition—although he never cites anarcho-primitivist thinkers. While Jensen is a fringe figure in the academy, Morton is a rising star in the critical-theory firmament (even landing a celebrity endorsement from pop diva Björk). Morton's (2017, 13, see also 49) recent work, *Humankind*, critiques leftist thought for not being open to the “phenomenology of First Peoples” due to the Left's being “fearful of primitivism, a concept that inhibits thinking outside agrilogistic parameters.” We have been trapped inside such thought parameters ever since “the Severing”—the “foundational, traumatic fissure” that opened between humanity's *reality* and the *real* (in the Lacanian sense) of the “ecological symbiosis of human nonhuman parts in the biosphere”—which was effected by the rise of Mesopotamian civilization (13).

The Left needs to reconnect with the “symbiotic real,” argues Morton (2017), which involves achieving solidarity with nonhumans (animals, clouds, objects, ecosystems) and entering a state of “nowness.” Marxism needs to embrace animism, a step that should not be dismissed as an appropriation of First Peoples' cultures. Fear of such appropriation, argues Morton, is equivalent to the imperial British, who drew “sharp lines of cultural difference between themselves and the subjugated people whose habits ‘just weren't cricket’” (97). If we drop the freight associated with the term “primitivism,” we move, with Morton, toward a reprise of the notion of the “future primitive” (although Morton does not use this term). Rather than an austere renouncement of the goods of a consumerist society, Morton calls for an ecstatic, joyful vision of communism. The change needed involves a deep ontological shift, the breaking of the inside-outside boundary of social space established by the “violence of post-Mesopotamian civilization” (23).

Morton and Jensen offer, arguably, the two most productive contemporary approaches to the themes that animated anarcho-primitivist thinkers, although we find resonances with these themes stretching across contemporary critical thought. While it is easy to dismiss anarcho-primitivism as an ultra-Left curiosity, an extreme line of thought better kept on the margins, it is our contention that this tradition forged important conceptual paths that the contemporary Left will benefit from critically retracing.

Critical Evaluations and Concluding Remarks

Anarcho-primitivists offer a multistranded critique of civilization, holding that we have fallen from the innocence and grace of hunter-gatherer existence. The fall is dated to the time of the Neolithic Revolution, the foundational moment for private

property, patriarchy, and the state. Central to this fall is a transformed epistemological and practical orientation—separation, instrumentalism, abstraction—tied to questions of science and the development of technique, which are seen as far from neutral, tending toward autonomy and the enchainment of human beings. Technique is linked to the fragmenting division of labor and generalized disempowerment, as human beings come to be ever more infantilized and dependent. Civilization is linked to patriarchy, militarism, conquest, and genocide; less drastically but just as destructively, civilization is implicated in homogenization and mass cultural conformity. Modernity intensified civilization's ill effects, forging damaged, controlled, spiritless, and aggressive human material in its wake; generating mass murder and ecological devastation; and multiplying unfreedoms, deadening conformity, and domination. The alternative lies in the construction of "future primitive" social configurations, entailing reconnection with the natural world, decentralization, self-sufficiency, a simpler, less technologically mediated form of life, and spiritual-intellectual reenchantment—a tiger's leap away from the "interlocking armoured juggernaut" that is capital, technology, state (Bradford 1989, 50).

In critically engaging with this current, we have indicated the existence of a problem with agency, given primitivism's displacement of the working class and its strong reading of the total character of contemporary ideology. On the one hand, we might read anarcho-primitivism's narrative of domestication, wandering, hyperalienation, and mass misery as, above all, a political-rhetorical strategy aiming to mobilize moral indignation and condemnation. Such a reading attends to the existential and political role of primitivism's purifying impulse (Bey 2017; Smith 2002), which seeks to rouse revolutionary élan, or something akin to what Benjamin (1968) described as a "weak messianism." On this score, we might applaud the surprising radical contemporaneity of the return to existential-leftist impulses of refusal and living otherwise, which marked the alternative globalization movement and Occupy. Here, as well, a postsecular impulse plays an important energizing role, a powerful dimensional operative, though officially and explicitly condemned and excluded within much of historical Marxism and anarchism. On the other hand, primitivism's powerful negative hermeneutic, its account of humanity's fall, fails to match its frail positive hermeneutic, its extant utopian dimension.

It is impossible, in drawing up a balance sheet of anarcho-primitivism, to ignore the vehement attack launched by Bookchin in the mid to late 1990s.⁹ Bookchin (1995, 19) condemned primitivism for its withdrawal from the social domain into what he called lifestyle anarchism, a "turning inward" that ended up ditching Enlightenment and reason, retreating into a romanticism that had reactionary, mystical, misanthropic, and even racist and fascistic tendencies (Bookchin and Foreman 1991). For Bookchin, primitivism was merely an expression of our times rather than a solution to contemporary troubles. This frequently bitter, sectarian

9. For more, see Black (1997), Bookchin and Foreman (1991), Bradford (1989), and Watson (1996).

debate often occluded the remarkable affinities in play. The primitivist current might also be viewed critically through the lens of Jonathan Friedman's (1995) analysis of the identity consequences of the systemic crisis of the world system after the 1970s, with multipolarity and global turbulence generating a range of new dominating identity impulses, including traditionalist rerootings (ethnos, nation, doctrine, place) and primitivism. This reading is perhaps all the more convincing given the shedding of more conventional left-communist commitments by some anarcho-primitivist authors in the wake of the political and countercultural surges of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰

Despite its melancholic timbre, totalizing pessimism, and practical limitations, there are elements worth salvaging, or at least meditating upon, within this "extremist" critique of civilization. As indicated, there remains a strong popular current of ambivalence about technological development, not only with respect to the uncertain and risky ecological consequences of such development but also with regard to the suspicion that this development might be bound up with waning solidarity and with disconnection, infantilization, weakening authenticity, and the like. In particular, the existentialist, communal, being-centered notes sounded by primitivism are due something of a comeback—in opposition to the widespread dissatisfaction with the predominant liberal suspicions of commonality; the obsession with growth, profit, and competition; and an individuality wholly conditioned by the market. It is here that anarcho-primitivist thinkers still have something to offer us, after the prohibitions of the antiessentialist and triumphant liberal moment.

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10. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, Perlman (1989) was associated with Glaberman's *Facing Reality* and Dunayevskaya's *News and Letters*, and Zerzan was involved in union and then ultra-leftist politics.

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