

The Rising of the Barbarians: A Non-Primitivist Revolt Against Civilization

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If we examine much of the current debate in anarchist circles surrounding civilization, technology, progress, green anarchy versus red anarchy and so on, we are left with the impression that criticism of civilization has only recently arisen within anarchist and revolutionary thinking. But this impression is false, and harmful for those of us with a revolutionary anti-civilization perspective.

In fact, a revolutionary questioning of civilization, of technology and of progress can be found throughout the history of modern revolutionary thinking. Charles Fourier posed his utopian socialist “Harmony” against the disharmony of “Civilization”. A number of the most radical of the Romantics (Blake, Byron and Shelly among others) were distinctly distrustful of industrialism and its utilitarian reason.

But we can bring things closer to home by looking at anarchists of the 19th century. Certainly Bakunin had no problem with industrial technology. Though he didn't share Marx's almost mystical faith in the capacity of industrial development to create the technical basis for global communism, he also did not see anything inherently dominating in the structure of industrial systems. In fact, his concept of workers taking over the organization of society through their own economic and industrial organizations was to eventually become the basis of anarcho-syndicalism. (This development, however, is based on a misunderstanding, since Bakunin quite clearly stated that this organization was not something that could be developed on an ideological basis outside of the direct struggle of the workers, but rather that it was something that the workers would develop for themselves in the course of their struggles. He therefore did not suggest any specific form for it.) Nonetheless, Bakunin's appeals to the “unleashing of the wicked passions” of the oppressed and exploited were seen by many of the more reasonable revolutionaries of the time as a barbaric call for the destruction of civilization. And Bakunin himself did call for “the annihilation of bourgeois civilization” along with “the destruction of all States” and the “free and spontaneous organization from below upward, by means of free associations”. But Bakunin's French contemporary, Ernest Coeurderoy, was less conditional in his rejection of civilization. He says simply: “In civilization, I vegetate; I am neither happy, nor free; why then should I desire this homicidal order to be conserved? There is no longer anything to conserve of that which the earth suffers.”

And he, along with Dejacque and other anarchist revolutionaries of that time, appeals to the barbaric spirit of destruction to bring an end to the civilization of domination.

Of course, the majority of anarchists at that time, as in our own, did not question civilization, technology or progress. Kropotkin's vision of communized "Factories, Fields and Workshops" or Josiah Warren's "True Civilization" inevitably have more appeal to those who are not prepared to face the unknown than the anarchist critiques of industrialism and civilization that often offer no clear vision of what will be after the revolutionary destruction of the civilization that they hate.

The early 20th century, and particularly the great massacre known as World War 1, brought a major overturning of values. Faith in the bourgeois ideal of progress was thoroughly eroded and the questioning of civilization itself was a significant aspect of a number of radical movements including dadaism, Russian anarcho-futurism and early surrealism. If most of the better known anarchists (such as Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Mahkno and so on) continued to see the possibility of a liberated industrial civilization, other lesser known anarchists saw a different vision. Thus, around 1919, Bruno Filippi wrote:

I envy the savages. And I will cry to them in a loud voice: "Save yourselves, civilization is coming."

Of course: our dear civilization of which we are so proud. We have abandoned the free and happy life of the forest for this horrendous moral and material slavery. And we are maniacs, neurasthenics, suicides.

Why should I care that civilization has given humanity wings to fly so that it can bomb cities, why should I care if I know every star in the sky or every river on earth?

[...]

Today, the starry vault is a leaden veil that we vainly endeavor to pass through; today it is no longer unknown, it is distrusted.

[...]

I don't give a damn for their progress; I want to live and enjoy.

Now, I want to be clear. I am not bringing all of this up in order to prove that the present-day anti-civilization current has a legitimate anarchist heritage. If its critique of the reality we face is accurate, why should we care whether it fits into some framework of anarchist orthodoxy? But Bakunin and Coeurderoy, Malatesta and Filippi, all of the anarchists of the past who lived in struggle against domination, as they understood it were not trying to create any ideological orthodoxy. They were participating in the process of creating a revolutionary anarchist theory and practice that would be an ongoing process. This process has included critiques of civilization, critiques of progress and critiques of technology (and often in the past these critiques were not connected, so that, for example, Bakunin could call for "the annihilation of bourgeois civilization" and still embrace its technological outgrowth, industrialism, and Marcus Graham could call for the destruction of "the machine" in favor of an unmechanized civilization). We are living in different times. The words of Bakunin or Coeurderoy, of Malatesta or Renzo Novatore, or of any of the anarchist writers of the past cannot be taken as a program or a doctrine to be followed.

Rather they form an arsenal to be looted. And among the weapons in that arsenal are barbaric battering rams that can be used against the walls of civilization, of the myth of progress, of the long-since disproven myth that technology can save us from our woes.

We are living in a world in which technology has certainly gone out of control. As catastrophe follows catastrophe, so-called “human” landscapes become increasingly controlled and mechanized, and human beings increasingly conformed to their roles as cogs in the social machine. Historically the thread that has gone through all that is best in the anarchist movement has not been a faith in civilization or technology or progress, but rather the desire for every individual to be free to create her or his life as he or she sees fit in free association others, in other words, the desire for the individual and collective reappropriation of life. And this desire is still what motivates anarchist struggle. At this point it is clear to me that the technological system is an integral part of the network of domination. It has been developed to serve the interests of the rulers of this world. One of the primary purposes of large-scale technological systems is the maintenance and expansion of social control, and this requires a technological system that is largely self-maintaining, needing only minimal human intervention. Thus, a juggernaut is created. The recognition that progress had no inherent connection to human liberation was already recognized by many revolutionaries by the end of World War 1. Certainly the history of the 20th century should have reinforced this understanding. We look out now on a physically, socially and psychically devastated world, the result of all that has been called progress. The exploited and dispossessed of this world can no longer seriously desire to get a piece of this putrefying pie, nor to take it over and “self-manage” it. The reappropriation of life must have a different meaning in the present world. In light of the social transformations of the past few decades, it seems to me that any serious revolutionary anarchist movement would have to call industrialism and civilization itself into question precisely because anything less may not provide us with the necessary tools for taking back our lives as our own.

But my anti-civilization perspective is not a primitivist perspective. While it may indeed be inspiring to look at the apparently anarchic and communistic aspects of some “primitive” cultures, I do not base my critique on a comparison between these cultures and the current reality, but rather on the way in which all of the various institutions that comprise civilization act together to take my life from me and turn it into a tool for social reproduction, and how they transform social life into a productive process serving only to maintain the rulers and their social order. Thus, it is essentially a revolutionary perspective, and this is why I will always make use of anything in that arsenal which is the history of revolutionary theory and practice that can enhance my struggle. “Primitive” people have often lived in anarchic and communistic ways, but they do not have a history of revolutionary struggle from which we can loot weapons for our current struggle. Having said this, however, I do recognize those anarcho-primitivists who continue to recognize the necessity of revolution and class struggle as my comrades and potential accomplices.

Revolutionary struggle against the civilization of control and profit that surrounds us will not be the reasonable attempt to take over means of production. The dispossessed of this world seem to understand that this is no longer an option for liberation (if it ever was). If most are not clear about precisely who or what is the enemy, most do understand that they have nothing to say to those in power, because they no longer share a common language. We who have been dispossessed by this world now know that we can expect nothing from it. If we dream of another world, we cannot express that dream, because this world does not provide the words for it. And most likely many no longer dream. They just feel rage at the continuing degradation of their existence.

So this revolution will, indeed, be the release of the “wicked passions” of which Bakunin spoke, the destructive passions that are the only door to a free existence. It will be the coming of the barbarians predicted by Dejacque and Coeurderoy. But it is precisely when people know that they no longer have anything to say to their rulers, that they may learn how to talk with each other. It is precisely when people know that the possibilities of this world can offer them nothing that they may learn how to dream the impossible. This network of institutions that dominate our life, this civilization, has turned our world into a toxic prison. There is so much to be destroyed so that a free existence may be created. The time of the barbarians is at hand.

[...] May the barbarians break loose. May they sharpen their swords, may they brandish their battleaxes, may they strike their enemies without pity. May hatred take the place of tolerance, may fury take the place of resignation, may outrage take the place of respect. May the barbarian hordes go to the assault, autonomously, in the way that they determine. And may no parliament, no credit institution, no supermarket, no barracks, no factory ever grow again after their passage. In the face of the concrete that rises to strike the sky and the pollution that fouls it, one can well say with Dejacque that “It is not the darkness that the Barbarians will bring to the world this time, it is the light.” — Crisso/Odoteo

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