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The Truth About The Truth About Primitive Life

Into Kaczynski's Woods

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to head into the Woods, and feel the pain of having to sit here, looking at our little screens, the Woods are never lost to us. Even sitting in the office, surrounded by civilised ghouls, its spirit softly speaks, for the wild is not, first of all, a thing there, which I must acquire, and the Woods are not, first of all, a place I must get to. I am that.

It would seem that if a hellish world such as ours, one which deprives us of natural life, is here to teach us anything, it is that you can't get closer to the Woods than your own body.

Out of the Woods

The superiority of primal life over civilised living was well known to those who had the opportunity to judge the difference for themselves.

The proneness of human Nature to a life of ease, of freedom from care and labour appears strongly in the little success that has hitherto attended every attempt to civilize our American Indians, in their present way of living, almost all their Wants are supplied by the spontaneous Productions of Nature, with the addition of very little labour, if hunting and fishing may indeed be called labour when Game is so plenty, they visit us frequently, and see the advantages that Arts, Sciences, and compact Society procure us, they are not deficient in natural understanding and yet they have never shewn any Inclination to change their manner of life for ours, or to learn any of our Arts; When an Indian Child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our Customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and make one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return, and that this is not natural [to them] merely as Indians, but as men, is plain from this, that when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived a while among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from

whence there is no reclaiming them. One instance I remember to have heard, where the person was brought home to possess a good Estate; but finding some care necessary to keep it together, he relinquished it to a younger Brother, reserving to himself nothing but a gun and a match-Coat, with which he took his way again to the Wilderness.

(From Benjamin Franklin to Peter Collinson, 9 May 1753)

We know, from first-hand reports, that primal people were happy, that alienation was unknown, that sickness was rare and ‘mental illness’ non-existent. We know from the archeological record that primal folk never went to war, that their societies were egalitarian and that, despite certain features common to all sane human groupings, the variety of their cultural experience was almost unfathomably vast. And we know that these people were free, and we know¹ that freedom is its own reward. It is no surprise then, as Franklin notes, that those who had experienced such a way of life become ‘disgusted’ with civilisation, with its misery and confinement, and took ‘the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods’.

Ted Kaczynski, the notorious ‘domestic terrorist’ and radical author (who died last month) also went into the Woods. After he was arrested and his work became widely known, he became, for a short time, the darling of anarcho-primitivists such as John Zerzan, and with good reason, as his infamous manifesto makes a devastating case against civilisation, a worthy successor to his intellectual forebears, Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul. It came as something of an awkward surprise then, at least to Zerzan and company, when Kaczynski published *The Truth About Primitive Life*, which critiques anarcho-primitivism, highlighting the feeble

¹ Me and thee, dear reader, me and thee.

for a similar ‘expression’, but I would no more recommend that Beethoven’s dreadful life be emulated than I would suggest the reader take off all his clothes and head out of town. What we have to learn from the free individual, either the primal man in the Woods, or the primal-hearted genius in the studio, is just that; his individuality.

One of the most important characteristics of free people, often overlooked, is that they are, qualitatively speaking, utterly unique. They cannot be emulated and therefore, ultimately, there is no possible way to get what they have; because you are not them. You are you. You can be inspired by Krishnamurti, or by the Pirahã, and you can learn things from Henry David Thoreau and you can share, or by analogy understand, the conventions which formally unite these people¹¹. You have to do these things, this is how we learn and grow; but they can never give you what you are, which is something infinitely more profound, and simple, and good, than anything which can be literally described. If it could be literally described, then we would be able to plan out a path from here to there, from the you that you are to the you that you want to be, just as we can from the shop to the office.

But we cannot. The truth, as Jiddu Krishnamurti said, is a pathless way. We read about the lives of the pygmies or the Ju/’hoansi, we read Shakespeare and listen to Bach, in order to ignite the flame of our own humanity,¹² not to emulate theirs, and then who knows where the light will lead us? And who cares? The light is its own reward. And although we all want

¹¹ Individualism without convention, or tradition, is ego. Okay, so you never say ‘Hello. How are you?’ but instead flap your wings like a duck. Very ‘unique’, but this is self-contained, self-informed *personality*, it splits you from the context, and therefore from the source of genuine uniqueness, your *character*.

¹² “The hollow burned into our surroundings by the work of genius is a good place to put in one’s little light. hence the incitement that emanates from genius, the general incitement that fires one not only to imitation.” — Franz Kafka (diary)

also radically transformed. With our skills and traditions in tatters, with nobody able to do anything or remember anything, it seems impossible to imagine anyone, at least in this part of the world, resurrecting and readapting any kind of craft or robust, healthy society, but presumably it will happen in some fashion, somewhere. More fundamentally, there will be an entirely new *quality* to the world, a new way of being that only a world which has gone through the horrors we are facing can know, and this quality will form the foundation of the world to come, if there is a world to come.

But in the end, who knows, and who even cares? I don't, not very much. Primalism is where we came from and Primalism is where we are headed, but I no more care about the precise nature of that society than I do about what happens to me after I die. If there is a future world, one with human beings in it,⁸ it will be one worth living in, but I do not live there. I live here, and so I am concerned with what Primalism can mean to me, here and now. Let tomorrow take care of itself. If a new quality is to emerge, it is to do so here and now. And if I am to express that quality, it is not through guesswork, but through experiencing it here and now.⁹

Anyone looking at me sitting here hunched over my personal computer, wearing cotton trousers made in Lithuania and plastic reading glasses made in Denmark, would probably scoff at the idea that I or anyone like me can be in any sense primitive, but this is not so. As I outline here, the value of Primalism¹⁰ is not in providing a model which we should impose on the world, which would require intolerable — and very civilised — force, but as an expression of human nature which naturally creates natural social forms. The lives of geniuses of-

⁸ There might not be, we might all die. No biggie.

⁹ And, through my craft, through mastering the means to express it here and now.

¹⁰ A term I use to distance myself somewhat from the kind of 'anarcho-primitivism' that Kaczynski critiques.

political-correctness of those who advocate it, along with several uncomfortable facts of pre-civilised life glossed over by civ-critical academics (such as Marshall Sahlins).

The account, as with all of Kaczynski's writing, is compelling, scathing and clear, and far more valuable and incisive than the usual 'anarcho-primitivism = mass murder' / 'you can talk you're using a computer' knee-jerk reactions. It is a useful corrective to the romantic notions of anarcho-primitivists who see their own fanciful image of human life in the darkness of the distant past; a darkness which can only be illuminated by a self-knowledge which necessarily allows for whimsical, subjective wish-fulfilment². While Kaczynski's attack on such wish-fulfilment is peerless, *his* capacity for self-knowledge had definite and very obvious limits. It is against those limits that I'd like to offer ten brief counter-points to his critique.

1. Kaczynski's sample of primal societies is extremely narrow.
2. He brings his own experience in the wild to bear, an experience which was solitary, and therefore very difficult, and yet, as he writes elsewhere (with, some might say,

² Just as it does for cynical objectivism, although, despite the general popularity of the 'we've always been brutal egoists' school of anthropological thought, serious proponents — such as Napoleon Chagnon, Lawrence Keeley and Steven Pinker — are very thin on the ground, because none of the evidence bears out their Hobbesian outlook. Kaczynski is right to aim his critique at the more pernicious philosophy of leftists such as John Zerzan who aggressively supports trans-rights and believes that civilisation formed gender. On his radio show recently (11.07.23) Zerzan approvingly referenced a paper which is receiving a great deal of media attention, *The Myth of Man the Hunter* (Anderson et al., 2023), which purports to expose the 'myth' that men in primal societies hunt and women gather, but which, of course, exposes no such thing. Zerzan's anti-civ stance is rather selective. He's tooth and nail against technology, but when Anthony Fauci is asking states to impose technocratic lockdowns and high tech gene therapy on the world's population, Zerzan's all for it.

surprising sensitivity and beauty for a murderer), it was fulfilling and joyous;

'In living close to nature, one discovers that happiness does not consist in maximizing pleasure. It consists in tranquility. Once you have enjoyed tranquility long enough, you acquire actually an aversion to the thought of any very strong pleasure—excessive pleasure would disrupt your tranquility. One [also] learns that boredom is a disease of civilization. It seems to me that what boredom mostly is is that people have to keep themselves entertained or occupied, because if they aren't, then certain anxieties, frustrations, discontents, and so forth, start coming to the surface, and it makes them uncomfortable. Boredom is almost nonexistent once you've become adapted to life in the woods. If you don't have any work that needs to be done, you can sit for hours at a time just doing nothing, just listening to the birds or the wind or the silence, watching the shadows move as the sun travels, or simply looking at familiar objects. And you don't get bored. You're just at peace.'

3. Kaczynski waves away objections that a great deal of the primal grind would have been absent when hunter-gatherers were able to inhabit richer and more productive land than the marginal territories that civilisation pushed them into; before grudgingly admitting this is possible. Indeed there is an excellent section in the essay where Kaczynski points out the stupidity of assessing hunter-gatherer life from samples contaminated by civilisation—a contamination that has been as profound as it is significant.
4. A lot of Kaczynski's 'truth' of primitive life is in fact a celebration of it. He describes with approval and admiration, for example, the pleasure of doing meaningful work, one of his favourite themes;

world once existed—and it did⁶—primal societies such as we know them do not, quite obviously, present a template we can emulate. We can see how human consciousness healthily and happily manifests in primal society, we can learn from their empathic sensitivity to each other, their self softening rituals and traditions, and their almost miraculous lack of concern for tomorrow, but we cannot live as they do, because we are no longer those people, and the world is no longer that which they lived in, and it is unlikely to be again for a very, very long time.

So what kind of primalist society is possible? A future Primalism would, first of all, have to be based on primal consciousness — what I call 'panjective' awareness⁷ — and on the foundational social qualities this consciousness manifests. Secondly, it would probably reach something like the social and technological complexity of the medieval world which, in the absence of coal and oil, is about as far as human beings will ever be able to progress to. This complexity would not rest on intensive agriculture, which our stripped-bare land can no longer sustain, but on permaculture and horticulture, which would militate against the rigid hierarchies and debilitating religious oppression of our civilised past. There would still be hierarchies, but weak, 'flat' ones, such as those of the late Paleolithic, in which federal associations rested on the self-sufficient individualism of fluid, independent groupings.

All of this is more or less as it was, a return to a mix of simple hunter-gatherer consciousness, complex hunter-gatherer federalism and medieval technology. As for what will be new, it is almost impossible to say. Presumably, people of the future will adapt some of our techniques and materials to their situation, creating new forms. Some elements of our culture might survive, such as our musical tradition, or our mythic tradition,

⁶ Just not literally.

⁷ See *Self and Unself* and *Ad Radicem*.

In other words, one of the most astute critics of anarcho-primitivism agrees with its basic principles. What Kaczynski opposes is not, as he says, the belief that everything has been downhill since 10,000 BC, nor that primitive people had qualities without which we simply cannot function as human beings. What he opposes is not anarcho-primitivism, but *anarcho-primitivists*, who turn out to be more or less the same kind of ‘soft-headed dreamers, lazies, and charlatans’ as the rest of the anarchist and socialist world; namely, the leftists he hated and skewered at every opportunity.

Into the Woods

Ted Kaczynski’s arguments are impossible to ignore. For the most part, anarcho-primitivists do turn a blind eye to the less pleasant aspects of hunter-gatherer life, largely it seems biased by the feeble liberalism, ‘mushy’ utopian thought and hypocritical pacificism which Kaczynski excoriates with precision. Nevertheless, Kaczynski also had his blind-spots, chief of which the defect which most profoundly limited his analysis, a demonstrable lack of empathy. This concealed the truth of primitive, and of modern, life from him and it chronically distorted his general outlook on life, as evidenced by the fact that he felt blowing people’s faces up in order to get his message across was a good idea.⁵

Nevertheless, even if there was a point, in the far distant past, when human society was a kind of paradise—and there was—and even if the garden common to the mythoi of the

⁵ It’s worthwhile contrasting Kaczynski’s assessment of primal man with that of D.H. Lawrence, one of the most sensitive human beings who has ever lived. Lawrence could look at primal or pre-civilised art and feel out the inner life of those who created it. Lawrence knew, from his own experience, what true empathy is capable of making of the world, which is why he yearned for a world which Kaczynski was at pains to repudiate.

‘Another thing I learned was the importance of having purposeful work to do. I mean really purposeful work—life-and-death stuff. I didn’t truly realize what life in the woods was all about until my economic situation was such that I had to hunt, gather plants, and cultivate a garden in order to eat. During part of my time in Lincoln, especially 1975 through 1978, if I didn’t have success in hunting, then I didn’t get any meat to eat. I didn’t get any vegetables unless I gathered or grew them myself. There is nothing more satisfying than the fulfillment and self-confidence that this kind of self-reliance brings. In connection with this, one loses most of one’s fear of death.’

5. Kaczynski understood work very well. He understood *doing* things, but he didn’t understand *being* things. This, as I outline in *The Myth of Meaning*, was his most serious failing. He’s right, in this case, that it’s a tedious grind to wash nuts and gut meat and so on, but he spends no time discussing the general quality of non-alienating work. He even lumps ‘child-care’ into work, as if taking care of children under primitive conditions is equivalent to what it is like for us today. He also suggests that modern man’s unhappiness is because he has *more* work to do, which takes up his ‘free time’, rather than that *all* the work we do is soul destroying.
6. Kaczynski criticises the anarcho-primitivist belief that primal societies exhibited a high degree of gender equality, before stating that this is just what they did have, compared to those civilisations which followed. From his small sample³ Kaczynski presents cases of men exerting power over women and treating them horrendously, which certainly happened, but this is not a counter-argument, nor is the fact that men make

³ Also here.

manifest decisions in primal societies when these are often ratified informally by women. The point is there *have* been societies where men and women lived well and happily together (even with — shock-horror — men behaving like men) and these were not civilised societies. It seems reasonable to suppose that there were more such societies the further back in time we go, give that less civilisation always equals more freedom, peace and happiness.

7. Kaczynski mentions violence, which also occurred in primal societies, and then rightly points out that this is not ‘alienating violence’. Homicide was as rare as warfare, which was all but non-existent in our Paleolithic past. Primal society was peaceful in the same way that nature is peaceful; which is to say, *essentially* peaceful. The overwhelming inner experience of living in nature, as Kaczynski himself noted, is one of astonishing tranquility, occasionally punctuated with a drama and contention that, in the absence of ego, never gets a chance to become tyrannous. This is the peace that the primalist yearns for, not some kind of sterilised condition in which it is impossible to get angry and hit a man; which, as Kaczynski understood all too well, is a civilised condition—one much touted by ‘pacifistic’ socialists—not a primal one.
8. Likewise, Kaczynski describes primal societies as competitive, which is indeed the case. And why should it not be? In a sane society competitiveness and cooperation work together. He highlights the extreme premium on self-sufficiency and individualism in primal society, but seems unable to understand, at least here, that not having to depend on others leads to less of the violence and lack of egalitarianism he ascribes to pre-civilised groups.

He notes with approval the many examples of care, generosity and good naturedness among hunter-gatherers.

9. Kaczynski then makes the ludicrous point that our society, like those of primal people, is also one of cooperation and sharing. He writes;

‘Of course, we share too. We pay taxes. Our tax money is used to help poor or disabled people through public-assistance programs, and to carry on other public activities that are supposed to promote the general welfare. Employers share with their employees by paying them wages.’

This is no more ‘sharing’ than giving a lab rat a chew of one’s chocolate bar is, and Kaczynski knows this.

10. Kaczynski says that where food is abundant it will *‘maximize the likelihood of the social hierarchies that anarchoprimitivists abhor’*. Speaking for myself, I don’t abhor hierarchies, or authority, and I think anyone who does so is a fool. The problem is rigid and coercive hierarchies, not leadership itself, nor even a couple of layers of prestige. The son looks up to the father, the father to the grandfather, the apprentice to the master, the master to the genius. And why not?⁴

Kaczynski concludes;

I agree with the anarchoprimitivists that the advent of civilization was a great disaster and that the Industrial Revolution was an even greater one. I further agree that a revolution against modernity, and against civilization in general, is necessary.

⁴ In any case Kaczynski here is making the old ‘if we had primal anarchism again we’d just become civilised again’ argument, which is like saying, ‘if you have a bath you’ll only get dirty again.’