What is Primitivism?

John Filiss

The following is my own attempt to define primitivism.

Primitivism is the pursuit of ways of life running counter to the development of technology, its alienating antecedents, and the ensemble of changes wrought by both.

Technology is here defined as tool use based upon division of labor…that is, tool manufacture and utilization that has become sufficiently complex to require specialization, implying both a separation and eventual stratification among individuals in the community, along with the rise of toil in the form of specialized, repetitive tasks.

The antecedents to technological development have been variously conjectured, but the answer to the question remains open. The best known writings along these lines are those of John Zerzan that question symbolic culture and its manifestation in number, language, religion, and ritual. Poorly understood in the anarchist milieu in which they first appeared, these types of explorations are especially important for their deductive value in developing new insights and evolving solutions.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand primitivism is as a counterweight to the pull of technology. Primitivism as a whole is the positioning of a conscious counter-force to the thrust of technological progress. Given the integrated nature of technological development, primitivism may be the only human-oriented[1] response to technology that goes far enough not to be subsumed by it.

The factors showing the necessity of primitivism are many, and may include

- an awareness that some societies in history and pre-history compare favorably with our own in many respects. The best known example of this may be the relative leisure of nomadic hunter-gatherer societies in comparison with the omnipresence of work in modern industrial society.

- a realization of the environmental destruction that appears as a necessary concomitant of technological progress.

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[1] Deep ecology and similar extreme environmental viewpoints largely argue for an end to industrial society as a sacrificial gesture arising from an awareness of environmental degradation caused by technology. Few people would find this kind of argument compelling.

- a concern over the predictions of technological progress made by Kurzweil, Moravec, et al,[2] describing the fast emergence of genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and in particular artificial intelligence systems that could subject biological humans to economic and environmental pressures with which our species may be unable to cope.

In fact, an acknowledgement of the potential value of primitivist theory can result from any deviation, however small, from a technological determinist viewpoint…a deviation that is almost universal in our society, despite its considerable faith in technological progress.

Primitivism today is an inchoate tendency, particularly considering the enormity of its goal. Within the context of an open society, the success of primitivism would require the apparent superiority of a primitivist approach to a technological one in almost every area that is ultimately germane to human well-being. Anything short of this accomplishment may involve a synthesis of primitivist and technological approaches in our society, but not the ousting of the latter by the former.

In contrast with many understandings of modern primitivism, the central issue presented here is not primarily a political problem, but numerous technical ones.[3] And unlike most musings in political theory, the kind of problem solving and awareness needed to push the primitivist project forward–e.g., insights into improving health–can often serve selfish ends apart from intellectual hobbyism or even their widespread adoption in our society. For the individual, primitivism as an area of exploration has the promise of a much more fulfilling pursuit than the study of most political philosophies. Whether it can realize that promise will be crucial to the question of its success on a social scale.

Does the trajectory of primitivism by itself reveal the most advantageous mode of existence for human beings? That is a question that nobody can answer. Whether our path should be primitivism, technology, or some synthesis between the two, it is time to think clearly about the days ahead. What is important is the development of a range of options for bettering the human condition, and it is in the expansion of those options that we can find our path to the best possible way of life.

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[2] Ray Kurzweil is an accomplished inventor and author of **The Age of Spiritual Machines**. Hans Moravec is one of the world's leading roboticists, and the author of two books, notably **Mind Children**, and numerous essays. Both are well worth reading for anyone with an interest in the direction of future technologies. While both of them are technological optimists, Moravec's projections in particular go well beyond even my own in their austerity… although I don't question his overall awareness of the enormous pressures that humans will face from Artificial Intelligences.

[3] It is unfortunate that primitivism is viewed largely as a political perspective, when nearly the entirety of its project falls outside the realm of specifically political solutions.

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