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A Critique of the Nomadic Hunter / Gatherer Ideal

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This kind of nihilistic thinking — there are many versions — may not seem like it could contain a lot of revolutionary potential, but history contains several major counter-examples. For example, many of the individuals the fundamentalist Islamic movement appeals to are less interested in Islam and more interested in its project of negation and sacrifice. The Nazis, too, coopted several surging nihilist and anti-civilization impulses to fuel their rise to power. To a lesser extent, anarchist and communist forces did the same in their various revolutions. And today, some of the most powerful social forces could be characterized as nihilistic ones, including, for example, the various major ways 4chan has influenced American society in particular. Although these impulses do not prop up the nomadic hunter/gatherer way of life as an ideal, and certainly not as a model society, they possess the willingness to dispose of civilization wholesale in the way that Kaczynski suggests will be necessary for effective revolutionary action. There is no reason to wall ourselves off from these forces by adopting an NHG ideal.

pen to art museums with their priceless paintings and statues? Or to the great libraries with their vast stores of books? Who will take care of the artworks and books when there are no organizations large enough and rich enough to hire curators and librarians, as well as policemen to prevent looting and vandalism? And what about the educational system? Without an organized system of education, children will grow up uncultured and perhaps illiterate. Clearly, anyone who feels it is important to preserve human cultural achievements up to the 17th century will be very reluctant to see a complete breakdown of the system, hence will look for a compromise solution and will not take the frankly reckless measures that are necessary to knock our society off its present technological-determined course of development. Hence, only those can be effective revolutionaries who are prepared to dispense with the achievements of civilization.

But this is more a concern about values than a concern about ideals, and it requires no model society. There have, in fact, been many anti-civilization impulses that did not see hunter/gatherers as particularly model examples of human life. For example, some pessimistic philosophers believe that human life is inherently painful and perhaps a product of some irreversible evolutionary mistake, like consciousness. This kind of thinking argues that even NHGs had the problems that lead pessimistic and nihilistic philosophers to reject the project of civilization, which they view as a futile attempt to escape the facts of human existence. In other words, to these philosophers NHGs are not an ideal; they are just an inevitability. Their rejection of the civilizing project stems from their rejection of the idea that our central human problems can be improved upon, as well as a conviction that almost all of our attempts at improvement have only worsened the situation.

Contradictions in the Reasoning

Ted Kaczynski (TK) suggests a nomadic hunter/gatherer (NHG) ideal, because, he claims, a movement needs a positive ideal as much as it needs an enemy. On the other hand, he says that it would be impossible to control post-collapse conditions and in fact imagines that agriculture will inevitably arise where the soil and climate are suitable for it. “No ideology,” he writes, “will persuade people to starve when they can feed themselves by planting crops.” He also repeatedly states that revolutions have only ever succeeded at destroying or conquering their target society, never implementing their ideal society (see ISAF, paragraph 182). Therefore, the object of anti-industrial revolutionaries should only be “the elimination of modern technology.” Otherwise, they might be tempted to use the techno-industrial system to implement their ideal, and, if history is any indication, they will fail.

These two considerations make the NHG ideal seem rather useless. What could be the purpose of it if nothing about it has practical applications?

The Impossibility of the Ideal

Advocating NHG society as an ideal seems kind of silly when few, if any, could do anything to seriously approach it. Suppose a hypothetical situation in which a small group of individuals form a band that escapes civilization for one of the remaining wilderness areas.

(a) What would they do when people get sick? While it is true that NHGs before colonization were relatively free of infectious disease, nowadays, after colonization, that doesn't matter. The hypothetical band would have to use industrial medical infrastructure to deal with these kinds of illnesses. Traditional medicine is no alternative, not only because it cannot deal with some of the

health problems modern people face, but also because most of the localized knowledge of traditional medicine has been lost in now-industrial nations. One could imagine this hypothetical band doing research to reclaim some of the remaining knowledge, but all they would have are scraps isolated from a system of knowledge that largely works as one unit, and that was the result of *collective* wisdom accumulated over a great period of time. Furthermore, these traditional medical systems involved some degree of specialization of labor, along gendered lines and in regards to “medicine men” and the like, and that kind of community dynamic takes a while to function properly.

Furthermore, a huge amount of traditional medicine was *preventative* and relied on active lifestyles, healthy environments, and good nutrition to combat the majority of the illnesses that would be encountered. Wilderness areas that remain do not usually suffice. Many of them are wildernesses precisely because humans could not inhabit them, and environmental degradation in areas that could once support humans now make those areas unsuitable for more than just a small group. Pollution in the air, water, soil, and food chain would also affect the ability of the hypothetical group to have good nutrition, which is a primary determinant of good health. Even present-day indigenous people are having difficulty supporting themselves because of environmental degradation.

If the hypothetical group needs to go to hospitals for sufficient medical care, it will also need IDs, birth certificates, the ability to follow civilized manners and mores, etc. This significantly reduces their ability to implement the NHG ideal.

(b) Where would they find people to marry and have children with? Humans need other humans, and other humans are in civilization, which has a monopoly on social life as much as it has a monopoly on land or the use of force.

(c) How would they deal with the legal system, its police forces and its property laws? Presumably this hypothetical group would spend a large amount of its time avoiding the legal system and

these years.” And Rousseau, of course, famously used primitive life as a central pillar of his social critiques.

The second reason knowledge of NHG societies is useful is that it demonstrates one of the many possibilities for human life that are cut off completely by the continued progress of the technological system. I do not think we should advocate any model of society, both because we cannot be sure enough of our own knowledge to do so, and because advocacy will always lose to material conditions, which create the most basic and powerful incentives that determine the shape of a society. Instead of advocating a model society, then, it is wiser and more convincing to talk of various possible modes of life that would be in grasp if the stumbling block of the world technological system did not exist. This takes into account the diversity of the responses people have to the world social system; instead of seeking to homogenize those responses, all Kaczynski’s revolutionaries have to do is point out their common enemy. Muslims in Middle Eastern society are probably not going to embrace a pagan society as an ideal; neither are Christian fundamentalist cults in the U.S. Individuals who grew up in farmlands are not going to buy a critique of agriculture. But all of these groups cannot realize their desires precisely because of the stronghold of the world technological system.

That is not to say that the main leaders of Kaczynski’s revolution could afford to be lax about their anti-civilization *values*, regardless of their practical course of action. As he points out in a letter to Professor David Skrbina:

... if one takes the position that certain appurtenances of civilization must be saved, e.g., cultural achievements up to the 17th century, then one will be tempted to make compromises when it comes to eliminating the technoindustrial system, with the possible or probably result that one will not succeed in eliminating the system at all. If the system breaks down, what will hap-

with the wanna-be-Indian types today. Unnecessary emphasis on the NHG ideal would associate radicals with this stereotype, and I don't think that is to their advantage. Speaking from personal experience, the people you want on your side don't exactly take you seriously.

Finally, the ideal also seems to attract people from the higher strata of society who only understand NHG society in abstract terms and have no real conception of the work required to live in non-industrial conditions. This breeds the kind of idealization of primitive life mentioned above, as does the widespread acceptance of various "noble savage" mythologies. An example of the latter: some members of my family often mention how Native Americans "used every part of the animal" without wasting anything. At first I didn't say anything about this. But when we went to visit a museum on Native American history, I saw an exhibit showing a plains Indian buffalo hunt, during which Natives would drive whole herds of buffalo over a cliff and only take a percentage of the kill. I briefly mentioned the "every part of the animal" mantra, there was a short discussion of denial, and I simply let the topic pass. These conceptions of Native life are much too widespread, especially in the U.S., to really counter, and arguments about them seem to me to be a waste of time.

Uses and Alternatives to the Ideal

None of this is to say that we should never mention nomadic hunter/gatherer society. On the contrary, knowledge of primitive societies is extremely important, for at least two reasons.

First, it is useful for critique. As Paine wrote, "To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man." Nietzsche writes that "everything *essential* in human development occurred in primeval times... Man probably hasn't changed much more in

skirting property laws. But inevitably some of its members will get wrapped up in the legal system, also requiring IDs, birth certificates, etc. This is all assuming that the hypothetical group can skirt property laws effectively enough to truly live off the land, which would require, at the very least, a nomadic cycle of travel or an enormous and biodiverse region of land with few borders dividing it.

Of course, as stated below, the ostensible purpose of the NHG ideal is not to encourage people to implement it, only to provide a positive social vision. Still, the factors listed above are important because they will presumably be just as relevant during and some time after a collapse of industrial infrastructure anywhere it happens to occur. In any case, people don't successfully form societies based on abstract commitment to ideals. They shape their societies in response to the economic, technological, and environmental conditions around them, and usually they will choose the easiest path to satisfying their needs. If societies transition to an NHG mode of subsistence, then, it will be out of necessity, not ideological commitment.

The Population Problem

If the world were to revert to a hunting and gathering mode of subsistence, most of the population would die. This is one of the primary criticisms aimed at primitivists, and there is no way around it. But if the goal is only to "eliminate the industrial system" and not to implement an NHG way of life, then discussion of the NHG ideal makes discussions about the population problem unnecessarily difficult.

For one, if TK is right that the rise of agriculture is inevitable in suitable environmental conditions, then the end of the industrial system would not necessarily mean a world of a few hundred thousand hunter-gatherers. In fact, the world would likely be able to

support large population centers and even complex governments akin to those of the Romans or Incans. Certainly it would be able to support many of the social structures present in the rural, isolated, or “undeveloped” parts of the world.

Should there ever be a widespread reaction against the industrial system, it will most likely instigate a collapse that would span several decades, at least. And, although some civilizations have collapsed rapidly even from the perspective of its constituent citizens, *world society* is likely to fall apart because of disparate and sometimes unrelated disasters — more like the fall of Rome than the collapse of Easter Island. In this case, some regions will fare quite well. Consider how well much of Europe did after the economic collapse caused by the Bubonic Plague, or what life in the Middle Ages was like beyond pop culture stereotypes.

In other words, the collapse of world society would not result in the deterioration of all social infrastructure everywhere, mainly just the social infrastructure of states, large corporations, and world or state economies. This means there would be significantly less death and destruction than people imagine. It also means that a number of people will survive off of materials scavenged from the deteriorating societal infrastructure around them, which will increase the size of the supportable population for a time. Small communities with minimal reliance on the system would no doubt find innovative ways of surviving as the large social systems around them break down, and this may result in societies that look nothing like the kinds of HGs extolled in primitivist anthropology.

There would of course be immediate dips in population that always occur during wars or revolutions. There would also be the immediate dips that occur during, say, economic or environmental disasters that contribute to war or revolution. (Importantly, however, these would not affect the merits of a revolutionary program, since the program would largely be *in response* to them).

But, after initial unrest in the collapsed or collapsing region, most people’s day to day lives will simply be reshaped by a new

set of social rules and regulations as they learn to cooperate for survival under their new conditions. Some regions may even see a population *increase* for a while, given that industrial nations nowadays tend to have very low birth rates.

The Effect of the Ideal

Because of the implications and impossibilities of the ideal outlined above, only a few classes of people would be attracted to it, and they do not hold much promise for effective responses to the problem of industry. Many of them are the very “crazies” that TK tells anti-industrial revolutionaries to separate themselves from. (*Paleofantasy* is, on the whole, a terrible book, but provides some examples of kooky theories with a nomadic hunter/gatherer ideal).

Furthermore, emphasis on the NHG ideal tends to cause unnecessary fights about anthropological facts. For instance, TK wrote a very long essay, “The Truth About Primitive Life,” for the sole purpose of critiquing what he saw as anarcho-primitivist fantasies. But none of these discussions are particularly relevant when it comes to actual action against the industrial system. What does it matter whether or not hunter/gatherers were egalitarian when industrial collapse will probably not make your society a hunter/gatherer one? What does it matter whether or not NHGs before colonization had this or that advantage, when NHGs after no longer have those advantages because of effects of colonization that cannot be undone?

There is also a certain stereotype of white people dancing around and trying to be Indians, and it exists for a reason. The NHG ideal advocated by Ted Kaczynski has some to do with the influence primitivist anthropology had on the radical environmentalist movement of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. This bred several variants of a subculture that extolled the values of primitive life, often based on romanticized visions, and produced the aesthetic we now associate