

# **Wild-life: anarchy, ecology, and ethics**

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# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction . . . . .                        | 3  |
| Deconstructing the Political Divide . . . . . | 4  |
| The Ethos of Ecological Anarchism . . . . .   | 9  |
| Ethos and Identity . . . . .                  | 13 |
| References . . . . .                          | 15 |

## Introduction

Anarchism implies and incorporates an ecological attitude towards nature.

(Morris, 1996: 58)

There could be several senses in which anarchism *might* imply and incorporate an ecological attitude, though that attitude, as one might expect, certainly takes many varied forms, from the rough and ready individualism of Edward Abbey (1991) through the ‘social ecology’ of Murray Bookchin (1982, 1986a, 1990) to John Zerzan’s (1994, 1999) ‘anarcho-primitivism’. Morris, himself, is concerned to distinguish his own vision of an anarchism he claims is informed by and complementary to scientific ecology from the perspectives proffered by those environmentalists he deems nature mystics and tribalists (1996: 9). In this, and other ways, he echoes, though in more measured tones, Bookchin’s (1994: 28) condemnation of deep ecologists as ‘airy mystics and reactionary misanthropes’. The ‘ecological humanism’ of Bookchin and Morris seems clearly at odds with the attitudes found in primitivist publications like *Green Anarchy* whose contributors often express explicit support for precisely those ‘mystical’ aspects of a deep ecological consciousness they find inspirational, whether drawn from the Tao Te Ching or Wicca. *Green Anarchy*’s attitude to science, ‘civilisation’s ally’, might be summed up by the subtitle to edition 11 (2003), ‘the unofficial “fuck science” edition’.<sup>1</sup>

The grounds of this dispute seem deceptively easy to identify. Indeed to refer to Bookchin and Morris as ‘ecological humanists’ is to highlight tendencies in their thinking which elucidate and inform their opposition to primitivism and deep ecology while simultaneously signalling their support for certain Enlightenment ideals.<sup>2</sup> While humanism has taken various forms as it becomes enmeshed in differing philosophical/political frameworks (Soper, 1986), it generally presumes a uniquely human capacity for self-definition, an ability to constitute ourselves as (relatively) autonomous individuals. This self-constituting process is usually portrayed as a progressive, culturally mediated, movement away from an inchoate natural condition, a coming to individual maturity that mimics, even recapitulates, society’s own ‘civilising’ historical telos, that is, its evolving transcendence of a primitive ‘state of nature’ (Smith, 2002a).

In many cases, including the humanism of Bookchin and Morris, these processes are linked to and dependent upon the deployment of a rational faculty that is both instrumental in facilitating our subjective self-understandings and capable of identifying and encapsulating the ‘objective’ rational ordering of the natural world. Post-Enlightenment humanism therefore frequently allies itself with a ‘scientific’ attitude and method that claims to provide privileged access to this world, an alliance which can marginalise and derogate alternative ways of relating to the world variously described as mythic, religious, superstitious, passionate, instinctive, and/or irrational. A convenient consequence of this division of powers is that any failure of this humanistic tendency to live up to its ‘progressive’ billing can be explained away as a momentary eruption of those same regressive elements, as a return of the culturally and rationally repressed. Indeed, in Bookchin’s own case his quasi-Hegelian teleology seems to be constantly at odds with the re-

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<sup>1</sup> There are two distinct publications called *Green Anarchy* in North America and the UK, though both are supportive of anarcho-primitivism. The edition referred to here is that published in North America

<sup>2</sup> As Morris (1996: 5) writes, ‘the kind of humanism I defend stems from radical developments within the enlightenment tradition . . . This radical humanism has been stridently and cogently defended by Murray Bookchin in his recent book *Re-Enchanting Humanity*’.

emergence of what he deems particularist, hierarchic, and irrational powers (see Kovel, 1998: 37). Despite world wars, genocide, nuclear weapons, unprecedented environmental destruction, and the willing adherence of significant segments of modern populations to the idiocy of conspicuous consumption, the humanist's belief in the reality of continual social progress thus remains relatively unscathed.

Primitivism, on the other hand, regards such damaging instances as both typifying and constitutive of the 'civilising' movement, both cultural and individual, away from the state of nature. It inverts the humanist's progressive interpretation of world history, regarding it instead in terms of a fall from a pre-historic condition of relative, if not absolute, ecological and anarchic social harmony. In Zerzan's (2005) words:

. . . we should avoid idealizing pre-history, refrain from positing it as a state of perfection. On the other hand, hunter-gatherer life seems to have been marked, in general, by the longest and most successful adaptation to nature ever achieved by humans, a high degree of gender equality, an absence of organized violence, significant leisure time, an egalitarian ethos of sharing, and a disease-free robusticity.

Primitivists deem 'civilisation' in all its various guises to be inherently destructive to biological and cultural diversity and to individual freedoms. The very idea of progress is, from this perspective, an ideological smoke-screen used to justify the increasing domestication and enslavement of human populations and ecological landscapes. Primitivism is not, though, as totalising in its critique as it might initially appear. For example, it is not straightforwardly anti-humanist in the philosophical sense of seeking to dissolve that autonomous self-defining human subject so central to humanist (and much anarchist) thought. Zerzan is actually very critical of what he terms the anti-humanist 'void' of postmodernism which 'subverts two of the over-arching tenets of Enlightenment humanism: the power of language to shape the world and the power of consciousness to shape a self' (Zerzan, 1994: 108). The complexity (and inconsistency) of the various positions encompassed by primitivism and its frequently troubled relations with similarly complex positions in, for example, deep ecology are often overlooked by critics.

## Deconstructing the Political Divide

The differences between social ecology/ecological humanism and what I shall term 'ecological anarchism' (by which I mean both those who explicitly refer to themselves as anarcho-primitivists like Zerzan, and those sympathetic to some aspects of their analysis) are frequently glossed in terms of this debate between 'progressive' rationalism and an emotive and 'regressive' irrationalism. Many social ecologists and perhaps even some primitivists might be happy to be so characterised. Bookchin (1995a) certainly believes that what he disparagingly calls 'lifestyle anarchism' is symptomatic of a contemporary situation 'plagued by the advent of . . . an anti-Enlightenment culture with psychologistic, mystical, antirational, and quasi-religious overtones . . . [where] the ecology movement risks the prospect of becoming a haven for primitivism and nature mysticism' (Bookchin, n.d.: 4).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bookchin regards this situation as indicative of a narcissistic turn away from notions of 'social revolution'. Lifestyle anarchism's 'preoccupations with the ego and its uniqueness and its polymorphous concepts of resistance

Superficially at least, anarcho-primitivism would seem to fit Bookchin's bill. Its advocates explicitly call into question a culture where 'Private property, industrial medicine and food, computer technology, mass media, representative government, etc., all work together to maintain our alienation from wildness' (Black and Green Network, n.d.: 1). Most, though not necessarily all, primitivists (see William, 2001: 39) refer positively to a pre-civilised past presumed to have existed before settled patterns of agriculture emerged, a time when hunter-gatherer societies lived a life of 'primitive affluence', much as envisaged by Marshall Sahlins in his influential *Stone Age Economics* (1972). Ironically, though, this idealisation of the distant past is not unique to primitivism. Bookchin himself has often alluded to the existence of more egalitarian pre-historic societies characterised by avoidance of coercion and 'complete parity' between individuals, age groups, and sexes, together with 'their high respect for the natural world and the members of their communities' (Bookchin, 1982: 56–8). For reasons that remain unclear, though, he distinguishes his utopian view of Neolithic farming communities from 'simplistic' and 'regressive' views of those like Sahlins who regard Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer societies as similarly egalitarian. White (2003) traces the way in which in later editions of *The Ecology of Freedom* and especially in his publications from the mid 1990s onwards Bookchin increasingly distanced himself from such speculations. 'Appalled by the growth of avowed "primitivist" and even "anti-civilizationalist" currents in American anarchist circles, Bookchin . . . appeared simply concerned to refute those who would seek to substitute mythic notions of a pristine and primitive past that probably never existed' (White, 2003: 46, quoting Bookchin, 1995b: 122). It seems though that Bookchin's position, for all his polemical excesses, might once have shared more with primitivism than he later admits (see also Best, 1998).

Primitivism certainly offers a crude, in your face, universal history of social and environmental decline, a kind of negative historicism that is the antithesis of Bookchin's own Hegelian eschatology.<sup>4</sup> 'Civilisation' apparently has no redeeming features and the term is often deployed with precious little qualification or analysis. This absence of socio-historical subtlety rightly irritates Bookchin (1995a: 48) who saw little of value in analyses where 'capitalism and its contradictions are reduced to epi-phenomena of an all devouring civilization and its technological "imperatives" that lack nuance and differentiation'. Putting the blame for just about everything on 'civilisation', whatever that might be, given the incredible diversity of human social organisations, is rather like blaming language for alienation.

In fact some primitivists, including Zerzan, come close to arguing this too (which is especially ironic, given his attacks on postmodernism noted above), regarding 'symbolic thought and linguistic communication . . . as very limited ways of thinking and modes of expression' (Black and Green Network, n.d.: 4; see also Zerzan, 1999: 31–43). Instead they advocate 'instinct', direct non-linguistically mediated personal experiences, and 'intuition as a crucial part of rewilding' (Ardilla, 2003: 46). A vision of an 'authentic' unmediated past relation to nature is contrasted with the so-

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are steadily eroding the socialistic nature of the libertarian tradition' (1995a). The epithet 'lifestyle', used by Bookchin in an entirely derogatory manner, fails however, as Mark Smith (1999) has noted, to recognise the importance of new patterns of social resistance associated with the activist politics of so-called 'New Social Movements' and intentional communities (Melucci, 1989). The 'expressive identities' Hetherington (1998) associates with these social movements have little in common with that individualism and egoism which is, ironically, historically more closely associated with Enlightenment humanism. Indeed the understandings of 'self' and 'self-awareness' posited by environmental anarchists and deep ecologists are extremely varied and should not be conflated.

<sup>4</sup> In Benjamin's (1992) terms 'historicism' may equally refer to belief in an unfolding continuum of historical progress or, as in primitivism's case, regress.

cial and ecological emptiness of the present and the possibilities of finding again what once was in a *Future Primitive* (Zerzan, 1994: 46). 'It is inherent within the essential "nature" of industrial civilization for it to be life-threatening', says Taylor (2003: 11); 'we must rediscover our physical connection and dependency upon the Earth, and reunite ourselves spiritually within nature'.

From Bookchin's and Morris's humanist perspectives primitivism's condemnation of civilisation in its entirety, coupled with calls for intuitive understanding of and/or spiritual attunement with(in) nature, epitomises an irrational nature mysticism. In this latter sense at least, deep ecology and anarcho-primitivism are supposedly cut from the same quasi-religious cloth. Morris is therefore concerned to rescue both ecology and anarchy from the 'motley assortment of creeds and cultures' from Zen to Druidism, Sufi to Shamanism, recognised as possessing insights into 'ecological enlightenment' by deep ecologists like poet Gary Snyder. For Morris:

. . . religious mysticism is neither an ecological perspective, nor is it conducive to human liberty and well-being. The notion that one receives self-realization or liberation through union with god (or the spiritual totality of existence) is not only mystifying and profoundly antilibertarian but politically dangerous. (Morris, 1996: 9)

Biehl & Bookchin (1995) in their critique of deep ecology similarly argue that it:

. . . disparages and often even demonizes reason as endemic to the anthropocentric worldviews that have produced the ecological crisis . . . Through intuition, deep ecologists argue, the continuity between the human self and the 'cosmic one' may be apprehended and appreciated. As an intuitional approach, however, deep ecology is subject to the dangers represented by earlier antirational and intuitionist worldviews that, carried over into the political realm, have produced antihumanistic and even genocidal movements. Deep ecology, by its very amorphousness, makes itself amenable to use by any parts of the modern social hierarchy, depending on how needs are defined. Indeed, it is not accidental that some deep ecology theorists are devotees of the 'late' work of Heidegger, whose basic premises are socially and intellectually reactionary. (Biehl & Bookchin, 1995)

In fact, contra Bookchin, even a superficial reading of deep ecological literature reveals that its proponents are not all indebted to some form of 'intuitionism' and call on a wide spectrum of philosophical antecedents. Although most do indeed regard personal contact with nature as a vital ingredient in developing ecological awareness many explicitly rely on evolutionary biology, scientific ecology, or even quantum physics to inform their understandings. Whether or not one agrees with these perspectives they also often make complex, explicit, and entirely 'rational' arguments to defend these theses. To recognise this 'amorphousness' for what it is, namely a wide diversity of positions united by concerns over the current condition of nature and a rejection of the more arrogant anthropocentric presuppositions of Enlightenment humanism, might however belie the kind of over-simplistic connections Bookchin wants to make between ecological anarchism and deep ecology so as to label them, en masse, irrational and politically reactionary.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ironically, in Tobias's (1988) key collection *Deep Ecology* Bookchin himself had complained bitterly about the fact that 'virtually any idea of a nature philosophy is burdened by a massive number of stultifying prejudices . . . where a conjunction of the words "nature" and "philosophy" automatically evokes images of anti-scientific ar-

Bookchin reiterates these worries in his critique of the writings of ecological anarchist David Watson (also known as George Bradford), summarising his stance as one where:

. . . redemption can be achieved only by regression. The rise of civilization becomes humanity's great lapse, its Fall from Eden, and 'our humanity' can be 'reclaimed' only through a prelapsarian return to the lost Eden, through recovery rather than discovery. (Bookchin, n.d.: 8)

Watson, and the Fifth Estate group with which he is associated exemplify, says Bookchin (1995a: 26–7), a 'mystical and irrationalist anarchism'. 'What is arresting in . . . [Fifth Estate's] periodical is the primitivistic, prerational, antitechnological, and anticivilizational cult that lies at the core of its articles'. For Bookchin, environmental problems are not a consequence of civilisation or progress, nor of reason per se; rather the problem lies with 'the ubiquitous claims of a "means–ends" rationalism that has historically instrumentalized human and nonhuman phenomena' (Biehl & Bookchin, 1995). Bookchin (1990: 12) rejects the wholesale application of this 'manipulative, instrumental and analytical' form of 'conventional reason' but warns against a 'knee-jerk reaction' (11) that identifies this limited and potentially damaging form of rationality with reason as a whole. 'In our aversion to a form of reason that seems to render us insensitive and unfeeling, we may easily opt for a cloudy intuitionism and mysticism that can easily render our world outlook very arbitrary and potentially very dangerous' (10).

Bookchin and Morris suggest that this kind of romantic 'irrationalism' about our potential relations to nature provides sustenance for those on the far right who might use a rhetoric of 'earth, blood and soil' to foster their totalitarian projects. 'Vaporous slogans about "community", and humanity's "oneness with nature" easily interplay with a "naturalistic" nationalism that has its apogee in Nazism . . . It requires only a minor ideological tilt in the ideas that made up the romantic movement of the last century to shift from William Blake's mystical anarchism to Richard Wagner's mystical nationalism' (Bookchin, 1990: 142). In places then Bookchin goes beyond emphasising political possibilities and tenuous historical links suggesting that, to the extent that certain deep ecologists' 'devotion' to Heidegger's works is 'not accidental', there already exist more fundamental reactionary affinities in their philosophies.

These are serious charges, even if only in terms of guilt by (word or philosophical) association and they have not gone unchallenged (see, for example, Stephens, 2001). Deep ecology and ecological anarchism are deemed incipiently fascist because they are defined as fundamentally irrational and quasi-religious forms of nature worship. But this kind of accusation seriously distorts our understanding of these movements, and, for that matter, the real dangers of fascism. While the role of a 'religion' of nature in Nazism has some support (Pois, 1986; Biehl & Staudenmaier, 1995) one should also note the Nazis' indebtedness to science, including the emerging science of ecology, in developing their understanding of a 'natural order' (Bramwell, 1992). The much vaunted 'rationality' of science did not, and does not, provide a guarantee that its concepts, practices, and products cannot also be (ab)used for nefarious political purposes.

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chaisms and "anti-modernist" regressions'. Amongst the prejudiced are neo-Marxists and empirical anarchists who 'uneasily regard all organicist theories as redolent of "dialectical materialism" and neo-fascist folk-philosophies. If such prejudices are not dispelled – or at least explored more insightfully and critically they will . . . foreclose any contact with a growing segment of the ecology movement that exhibits an exciting interest in self-reflection' (Bookchin in Tobias, 1988: 215). Bookchin refers explicitly to Heidegger to support his argument!

Indeed, as Zygmunt Bauman (1989) has eloquently argued, the view of Nazism as a singular eruption of irrationalist and counter-modern tendencies provides at best a partial, and at worst a fundamentally flawed understanding of events, an understanding that conveniently allows us to ignore Nazism's indebtedness to and embeddedness within a purportedly 'civilised' modernity. In many ways Nazi Germany exemplified the rationalist tendencies of modernity in its bureaucratic and centralised organisation, its striving for technical and social efficiency, and its deployment of science – though for the most unspeakable of ends. Insofar as:

. . . the promotion of rationality to the exclusion of alternative criteria of action and in particular the tendency to subordinate the use of violence to rational calculus, has been long ago acknowledged as a constitutive feature of modern civilization – the Holocaust-style phenomena must be recognized as . . . outcomes of this civilizing tendency, and its constant potential. (Bauman, 1989: 29)

My purpose here is not to debate the origins of fascism but to point out that anarcho-primitivists and their deep ecology 'allies' cannot be dismissed as irrational nature mystics sliding down a slippery slope to eco-fascism without engaging in serious historical distortions and omissions. Bauman's sophisticated analysis recognises the complex articulations of philosophies and politics and the ways in which they are often (mis)appropriated to construct understandings of 'progress' and 'civilisation' that suit immediate purposes. And although Bauman in no way whatsoever shares primitivism's anticivilisation stance his work explicitly counters the tendency to separate off modern Western civilisation's dark side, the inherent and permanently 'destructive potential of the civilizing process' (28), by blaming modern society's ills on external causes and/or irrational tendencies. To do so is no more credible or acceptable than blaming all social and ecological ills on something called 'civilisation' in general.

The problem in this debate between social ecology and primitivism is not just the shifting ground of key protagonists, including Bookchin, but the totalising positions and projections of both positions. Subtleties of arguments, and there are many, are often lost in blanket criticisms and unsophisticated mud-slinging.

Of course, their political appeal may (for some at least) lie precisely in this over-simplified invective but exaggerated and distorted claims are no substitute for critical engagement. These questions are important. They are not just part of an insignificant spat on the margins of mainstream politics, but deal with fundamental disagreements about the relations of differing conceptions of 'progress', 'civilisation' and 'nature' to political autonomy. Also, given the importance of the conjunction between anarchy and environmentalism evident in the writings and practices of environmental activists and in the works, however critical, of political commentators (e.g. Eckersley, 1991: 145–78), these debates have profound implications for environmental theory and practice. A less restrictive exegesis of these differences might elucidate these debates' wider significance.

Perhaps the unbridgeable chasm that Bookchin posits between social ecology and 'lifestyle' anarchism is not the gulf between rationality and irrationality; rather it is a gap between different conceptions of how anarchism actually 'implies and incorporates an ecological attitude towards nature' (Morris, 1996: 58). Those associated with anarcho-primitivism are not all irrational, if by that we mean incoherent, lacking critical insight, or refusing to engage in debate (though some anarcho-primitivists can be just as partial as Bookchin in terms of their knee-jerk rejection of the



insights of whole bodies of theory, e.g. those they label postmodern). Ecological anarchists also share much with social ecology, including a thoroughgoing critique of capitalism and a critique of instrumental rationality (though they differ about the degree to which they can be separated out from what they regard as the 'civilising process'). They are, like social ecologists, opposed to the various forms of ecological and biological reductionism and social Darwinism to be found amongst some environmentalists, including, unfortunately, a few who might think of themselves as deep ecologists. And it is these reductive forms of naturalism, which posit an inherent and fixed natural order to the world, an order to be used as a template for social organisation, that are, potentially at least, much more closely aligned with totalitarian visions than any 'lifestyle anarchism'. This indeed was the message of George Bradford's (1989) influential critique of neo-Malthusian tendencies in *How Deep is Deep Ecology?*, which initially appeared in *Fifth Estate*. John Zerzan has also remarked on the dangers of eco-fascism that stem from an inadequately radical analysis of the way technology is integrated into, and idealised by, modern social reality (Zerzan, 1994: 140).

The differences between 'social ecology' and 'ecological anarchism' might be better formulated as a matter of ethos. By this I mean not only differences over specific ethical values, for example in terms of concerns for nature, but over the understanding of the genesis and significance of those values in terms of their relation to self, society, and the natural world. This might sound strange given anarchist critiques of ethics (or rather, morality) as a form of social control (see below), but I shall argue that ecological anarchism takes a far more radical approach towards an environmentally oriented ethics (one that regards nature as being something of much more than instrumental use for humans) than social ecology's humanist presuppositions allow. In this sense, the 'unbridgeable chasm' between ecological anarchism and social ecology might itself be interpreted in a more historically sensitive and less totalising fashion as yet another incarnation of that gulf that the dominant strands of modernism installed between nature and humanity.

## The Ethos of Ecological Anarchism

Anarchism, properly understood has nothing to do with standards and values in a moral sense. Morality is to the mind what the state is to society: an alien and alienating limitation on liberty, and an inversion of ends and means. For anarchists, standards and values are best understood – that is, they are most useful – as approximations, shortcuts, conveniences. They may summarize a certain practical wisdom won by social experience. Then again, they may be the self-serving dictates of authority, or once useful formulations which, in changed circumstances, no longer serve any anarchist purpose, or any good purpose. (Black, 2004: 6)

Trust Your Desires. (Anti-Authoritarian Anonymous poster, in Zerzan, 1999: 311)

To speak of an ethos of environmental anarchism in the light of such statements might seem strange, but it is important not to read either Black's critique of the constraining effects of a socially imposed moral order, or the anti-authoritarian call to 'trust our desires', as straightforward expressions of ethical scepticism. They certainly do not deny the important social function played by morality (though they oppose its tendency, when imposed or universalised, to limit free thought and action), nor are they dismissive of ethical language per se. After all, the poster

calls on anarchists to ‘trust’ their desires, and Black’s statement too, despite its pragmatic bent, makes use of terms like ‘good purpose’ and is, in effect, a statement about the values he associates with anarchism. Black recognises that morality emerges from social practices and, as such, may condense a kind of ‘practical wisdom’ gained over time (and in so doing also puts some distance between his position and that of moral subjectivism).<sup>6</sup> But for him the chief danger of moral language is that it often takes the form of a call to order, to conformity, a nagging insistence that we must obey the dictates of others. To ‘speak of anarchist standards and values, then, is not necessarily nonsensical – but it does involve risks’ (Black, 2004: 6), most especially the risk of falling into a dictatorial form of moral absolutism.

Ecological anarchism actually espouses a particular and rather well-defined ethos. Yet this ethical sensibility, like everything else about it, goes against the grain of both the specific values that have dominated modernity and the dominant ways of formulating ethical concerns, that is, as abstract and supposedly universally applicable values (rights theories), methods (Kant’s 478 M. Smith categorical imperative, Habermas’s ideal speech situation) and/or calculative systems (utilitarianism). The crucial aspect in terms of both the values espoused and the form taken by ethical values in ecological anarchy is the recognition of experiences of wildness as the inspirational source of individual freedom, a wildness that rejects all attempts to impose a ‘civilising’ moral order. Ecological anarchists, in common with many elements of deep ecology, celebrate what they regard as the wildness of an unconstrained and untrammelled nature, of an unexploited world not yet entirely subject to commodification and domestication. To this extent they are supportive of radical environmental activists, like those in Earth First! ‘who fight in defense of wild living beings and places that haven’t yet been destroyed’ (Black and Green Network, n.d.: 1). In many cases they also link together ecocentric critiques of instrumental approaches towards nature and ecofeminist critiques of patriarchy. They are also critical of the ways in which the anarchist tradition itself has ‘been silent, in many ways about the domination of animals and nature, and the connections between them and the suppression of the female or feminine principle, by patriarchy’ (Black and Green Network, n.d.: 1) – anarchy has not, after all, always implied an ecological attitude.

Of course it might be objected that the very idea of ‘wilderness’ as ‘civilisation’s’ other, as something to be saved from human encroachment, is a historically particular product of modernity. There is an extensive literature tracking changing understandings of ‘nature’ (e.g. Cronon, 1995; Castree & Braun, 2001) including specific historical work on changing ideas and evaluations of wilderness and on primitivism itself (McGregor, 1988; see also Nash, 1982: 47–8). Without entering discussions about the ‘social construction’ of nature here (but see Smith, 1999) such literature would clearly suggest that primitivism too has a history, that its interpretations of nature and notions of self-liberation do not just arise instinctively, or emerge from unmediated exposure to wilderness – however defined. Rather, they call upon cultural precedents and rely upon a ‘metaphysical vocabulary’, to use Soper’s (1995: 61) phrase, ‘that has developed in tandem with the development of Western culture or “civilization” itself’. However, while primitivists (and deep ecologists) often do use the term wilderness uncritically, and while little of nature remains in an ‘untouched’ state, there are clearly places that are relatively wild in the sense of not being under constant human surveillance, regulation, and control, where non-human life continues *relatively*

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<sup>6</sup> Moral scepticism denies the existence of genuinely altruistic acts: e.g. by claiming that all people are basically selfish, moral subjectivism reduces morality to a matter of personal (subjective) preference.

unhindered. Such places can, and do, have profound effects on individuals' self-understandings and values. It also needs to be stressed that unlike deep ecologists, ecological anarchists tend to place emphasis on *wildness* rather than wilderness *per se*. As Zerzan (1994: 146) puts it:

Radical environmentalists appreciate that the turning of national forests into tree farms is merely part of the overall project that also seeks their own suppression. But they will have to seek the wild everywhere rather than merely in wilderness as a separate preserve.

Wilderness is certainly a source of wildness, a setting within which the upwelling of the free-spiritedness that subverts all attempts to tame and control it is expressed, but it is not the only source. In short, wildness is regarded as synonymous with creative freedom from social constraint.

In this sense then deep ecological understandings of wilderness come close to but do not provide the complete story. From an ecological anarchist perspective 'wilderness experiences' allow a person to recognise and express something of the wildness that, insofar as we too remain natural beings, lies within us all. It both illuminates humanity's affinity with wild nature and, in freeing individuals from the social obligations of everyday life, also reveals the extent to which our lives have become dominated by the social necessities of 'progress'. The suppression of wild (free) nature and individual human freedom is thereby related directly to the same 'civilising process'; both are made subject to increasingly pervasive social techniques and forces. In sum, the ethos of ecological anarchy recognises in wildness (and therefore insofar as wilderness embodies this in nature too) a 'principle' of freedom, but rejects moral principles insofar as these are regarded as imposing abstract and universal social limits on individuals' freedom to act.

Ecological anarchists are by no means alone in understanding morality as a socially constraining force, as sociological accounts like those of Durkheim and Elias exemplify. However, rather than regarding morality as a broadly positive (or at least ethically ambiguous) feature that ensures social coherence by regulating transgressions from social norms they see this entirely negatively in terms of the restrictive imposition of a social order on individual freedoms. This is, perhaps, indicative of primitivism's tendency to understand the self as something that is pre-social rather than being composed in and through (and potentially over and against) specific forms of socialisation.

For ecological anarchy then, 'anarchism implies and incorporates an ecological attitude towards nature' in a fairly straightforward way. Anarchism, understood as freedom from constraint, is wildness and that wildness is the living, creative, principle of nature, both wild nature and human nature, now dominated and repressed by the civilising process. Ecological anarchism thus turns the idea of progress on its head in every sense, technological, social, political, *and* moral. In opposition to civilisation's search for rational order in all these spheres it emphasises the liberatory power of individual desire. The alternatives are, Zerzan (1994: 146) argues, to carry on towards increasing domestication and alienation or 'turn in the direction of joyful upheaval, passionate and feral embrace of wildness and life'. This kind of understanding is by no means restricted to what Bookchin regarded as the irrational fringes of 'lifestyle' anarchism. There are good reasons to think that it has often been an aspect of anarchist politics. Woodcock, for example, refers to that 'antique vision' that draws anarchists 'nostalgically to a contemplation of man as he may have been in those fragments of a libertarian past . . . an attitude which not only seeks

to establish a continuity – almost a tradition – uniting all non-authoritarian societies, but also regards simplicity of life and nearness to nature as positive virtues’ (Woodcock, 1975: 22). And if the espousal of such values has ‘irrational’ or ‘mystical’ overtones then these are certainly not those associated with organised religion, hierarchic structures, or the imposition of a fixed moral order. There is more than an echo here of what Vaneigem (1994) refers to as ‘the movement of the free-spirit’, the recurring exuberant tendencies, like the Beghards and the Beguines, found throughout the European Middle Ages that rejected all religious institutional authority and all attempts to impose a moral order on individuals by church or state. These tendencies too often involved Edenic narratives of lost innocence. Vaneigem’s description of Margaret Porete, burned for heresy in Paris in 1310 with her book *The Mirror for Simple Souls*, might almost describe contemporary primitivism:

Whereas the Church was hostile to nature, Margaret proposed that it might be rehabilitated to its state before the Fall, before the appearance of sin and the invention of exchange. Access to it lies in the refinement of love, in an identification with the power it generates in everyone . . . desires are awakened and pursued freely, in total innocence, and with no sense of guilt. (Vaneigem, 1994: 132)

The ‘principle’ here is one of freely given love rather than wildness but the message is remarkably similar, of reconciliation with a natural state of innocence and the attainment of liberty through recognising and releasing the anarchic free-spirit embodied in everyone.

The ecological anarchist’s idea is, put simply, to choose ‘life’, the vitality that enables us to act creatively, thereby differentiating us as individuals. This vitality is also the thread of constantly changing events, the ‘natural’ flows that, while alive, connects us to each other. To be alive is to be (to exist and express oneself) in the world and to feel that existence in ourselves and in relation to others. Life, in this sense, is something that can be captured not by an objectifying scientific description but by an understanding and experience of the beauty and fragility of existence, of what it feels like to actually be alive at those moments when things seem most intense, when we weep or laugh, touch ice-cold water or the hand of a loved one. Ecological anarchism insists on the importance of recognising this vital (wild and inspirational) aspect of life rather than mere survival.

This contrast between life and survival is perhaps the fundamental feature of the ethos of ecological anarchy. In the most extreme forms of primitivism ‘civilisation’ is envisaged as nothing more than a survival machine with absolutely no benefits. From this perspective even the great ‘success’ stories of modernity, like modern medicine, increasing longevity, and so on, all come with a price attached, namely our increasing dependence upon the machine, and all are supposedly in the process of unravelling as, for example, drug resistance increases and ecological disasters loom. The machine offers an illusion of control over the world but, from primitivism’s perspective, each turn of the wheel actually decreases the individual’s potential to experience life in its fullness as we become ever more dependent, domesticated, and alienated from our own vital potential and the living world. Willingly or unwillingly the civilising process ensures that we come to trade life and liberty for mere survival-regulated continuance over time.

The issue of whether ecological anarchism implies a mystical, as opposed to a scientific, take on ecology must also be seen in this light. If by this its critics mean that its political ethos often has mythic overtones this seems undeniable. Some primitivists certainly posit a pre-civilisational

state of original innocence and authentic individual freedom in nature and, despite their frequent recourse to anthropology, it seems extremely unlikely that any such condition has ever existed in reality. But here we should recall that this myth is deployed precisely to challenge the no less illusory and contradictory rationalisations of those ‘states of nature’ used to justify inequality, property, the state, and capitalism by early-modern political theorists like Hobbes and Locke. These particular myths still ground the dominant political ideologies of contemporary society (Smith, 2002a) and modernism, for all its disenchanting power, has not dispelled so much as reconfigured them under various guises of rationality – the invisible yet all-powerful hand of the market economy, the neutrality of reason and/or its infallible ability to reach truth, the dialectical movement of history, and the most pervasive of all – that of rational progress.<sup>7</sup> If myths are expressive of the forms of life that constitute them then ecological anarchism at least has the merit of pointing out in no uncertain terms that these particular (modernist) myths have begun to wear a little thin given the realities of everyday life and the scale of environmental destruction.

The myths that primitivism invokes are not just fables for the foolish. They have a critical purpose and they also express something of the ethos of ecological anarchy in general. But the intensive internal debates *within* ecological anarchism over exactly what role these primitivist accounts should have are themselves indicative of diverse analyses of the way in which ecology can and should be articulated with anarchism. The fact that ecological anarchists might agree that modernity is inherently, and not accidentally, flawed in so many fundamental respects does not necessarily mean that they all have to think that people should or could revert to some pre-civilisational ideal.

Watson, for example, has explicitly rejected the kind of ‘fundamentalist’ version of primitivism that leads some to think the only alternative to is to try to return to a ‘forager existence’. The polemical excesses of this kind of primitivism certainly do not provide a practical politics for any but a tiny minority of people. And, like all fundamentalisms, this particular understanding of primitivism also promises to bury the complexities and subtleties of human existence under an overly simplistic ideology, a ‘reductionist legend in which primordial paradise is undermined by an ur-act of domestication so far back in time that one may as well give up speech, abandon the garden, and roll over and die’ (Watson, 2004: 36). It would be politically stultifying if anarchy could only imply ecology in terms of a naturalistic nihilism, a call to destroy civilisation in its entirety to save ‘something’ called wildness. It would also, incidentally, make little sense since the particular ‘wildernesses’ that are the foci of much environmental campaigning seem in much more immediate danger than *wildness per se*.

## Ethos and Identity

The promise and the problems of ecological anarchy coalesce around this issue of ‘wildness’. The promise lies in opening ways to connect concerns about human well-being and liberty to non-human aspects of our environment; ways that would go well beyond the anthropocentric humanism that characterises social ecology. It might thus make contributions to radical ecology in general and deep ecology in particular, opening debates that have ramifications far beyond the specialist journals and websites to which they are currently confined. After all, many, perhaps

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment, with every step, becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1973: 11–12).

even a majority, of environmentalists find 'wilderness' special because, and to the extent that, it is wild. They deem it valuable because it is not entirely dominated and constrained by purely human uses. To be sure, most recognise that wildness can be found in many places, from the pavement-cracking weeds on the city streets to those moments of liberating rebelliousness within us all. But wildness should also exist as something big enough to lose and find oneself in, something that draws us out of ourselves and the narcissistic culture that Bookchin so wrongly regards ecological anarchy as party to. In this sense we are not talking about 'life-style anarchism' but a 'living (ecological) anarchism'.

However, the *problems* of ecological anarchism also concern wildness: first, in terms of whether this idea can be conjoined with a coherent account of *our* 'civilisation's' ills that avoids the all or nothing fundamentalism Watson rightly critiques; and second, in terms of the question of whether 'wildness', however defined, is, by itself, enough to describe or provide a model of anarchic existence worth living. To put this another way; although the emphasis on wildness (as a potentially ecological version of what Vaneigem refers to as the movement of the free-spirit) provides a telling indictment of the imposition of (im)moral orders on humans and nature alike, can it provide an anarchic ethos that offers something more than straightforward civilisational nihilism?

The answer, I think, is that the idea of wildness is not sufficient for any anarchic and/or ecological understanding of selves and their relations to nature, that is, for any environmental politics. Nor, is it by any means as individually liberating as apologists contend. Purist (primitivist) versions of ecological anarchism ironically fail to recognise that the 'selves' they want to liberate, no less than the 'nature' in which this liberation is to occur, are themselves socially and historically entangled and composed. One cannot reject society and history en masse and still retain those self-understandings that have their sources within that same 'civilising process' (Taylor, 1996). This is a point that Bookchin (1995a: 14–15) also made.

The constant recourse to a partisan version of anthropology in primitivist literature to provide accounts of peoples who are deemed to have remained relatively untouched by the 'civilising process' is really indicative of a massive failure of theoretical and political imagination. It is not just that such accounts are presaged on a largely uncritical acceptance of explicitly modernist ideas of 'the primitive' as an uncivilised 'other'. To say that primitivism merely reverses the values associated with modernity's most pervasive categorisations (nature/culture, primitive/civilized) and hence remains within its purview is true but it is also trite. Nor is it simply a matter of primitivism's compounding exceedingly partial images of radically different contemporary cultures with vague and largely unverifiable musings on pre-historic affluence (see van Wyck, 1997; Graeber, 2004). Rather this failure is primarily indicative of a lack of self-understanding, that is, a lack of understanding what it might mean to be a human self, which always, in all times and places, involves being part of a culture. Not one of the peoples that are called upon as exemplars of primitivism's pre-civilisational ideal exists in a 'state of nature'. Not a single individual in all these peoples came to their own very different understandings of what being a human individual involves through simple exposure to wild(er)ness. Rather they all *found* themselves (were immersed and came to self-awareness) through their extraordinarily variable experiences of *social* as well as natural situations. Bearing these complex historical inter-relations between selves, societies, and natures in mind, and explicitly theorising them (in however many possible ways), is vitally important for ecological anarchism if it is to offer a genuinely different understanding of wild(er)ness and its political import.

There are certainly many options here. There might, for example, be links between ecological anarchists' understandings of wild-life and explicitly vitalist philosophies, such as Bergson's, perhaps especially in terms of Deleuze's (1991) interpretation of the *e'lan vital* as an expressive differential movement informing the world. Lefebvre's notion of maximal (productive) differences also offers possibilities (see Smith, 2002b: 265–6). Edward Casey (1993) too develops an intricate phenomenological argument that recognises that while no wilderness remains untouched by human influence, wild places and wildness can nevertheless still be found, even in the margins of urban environs. Although accepting, as suggested above, that the idea of wilderness as society's 'other' has a particular cultural history closely associated with the development of modernity, the traits of wildness these places express cannot, Casey (1993: 236) argues, 'be exhaustively analyzed in strictly culturalist terms. Each retains an uneliminable residue of the extra- or precultural', a 'field of affordances' that underlies and transcends those provided and regulated by culture itself. Wildness, on this view, is the culturally interruptive expression of a nature that is not just a social construct. The 'land or sea in its wildness actively resists our efforts to colonize it with cultural means. It is recalcitrant to these efforts, taking recalcitrant literally as "kicking back against" the constraints and restraints of culture' (Casey, 1993: 237).

The challenge then is one of diversifying and 'thickening' (to borrow Casey's term) the myriad possible connections between ecology, anarchy, and liberty as wild(er)ness. For as Thoreau, that most influential of environmental philosophers, famously declared, 'in Wildness is the preservation of the world' (1946: 672). And Thoreau's point too, as he explicitly said, was to make an emphatic and 'extreme statement' for he believed there were already 'enough champions of civilization' (660). Instead he chose to 'speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with freedom and culture merely civil' (659). Insofar as this is the aim of ecological anarchism this is an aim that many might actually share.

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