

# **Primitivism and History**

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## 1. The Sect of the Dog

Back in the middle of the Fourth Century B.C., a vagabond philosopher lived in Athens and Corinth, a philosopher who employed extravagant gestures and a provocative attitude to preach the rejection of all civilized conventions and a return to nature and spontaneity. Diogenes the Cynic, originally from Sinope, a city on the shores of the Black Sea, practiced what he preached: he lived in a clay jar, he neither voted nor participated in any other way in a citizen's duties, he had no fixed occupation and attended to both the "matters of Aphrodite" (sex) and the "matters of Demeter" (eating) in public. He went about with his staff and his coarse blanket, which served as his clothing by day and his bedding by night, and a wallet containing the simple items of his frugal diet that he acquired by begging, which never included cooked food. Criticizing the false idols that ruled the lives of his contemporaries, or the democratic institutions that had been perverted by tyrants and demagogues, or the social hypocrisy concealed behind allegedly sacred values, he opposed the laws of nature to those of society and chose the animals as his model, seeking freedom in a life without encumbrances outside the confines of the *polis*, far from its laws and prejudices. He laughed at exile, the worst punishment that could be inflicted on a Greek, and proclaimed that he was a citizen of the world; he said, "*the only true commonwealth is that of the universe*". He also rejected property and the family and advocated the community of goods, women and children: "*What I possess is not mine. Relatives, friends, family, fame, familiar places, lifestyle, all these things are foreign to me.*" [I was unable to locate an English-language source text for this quotation; it appears to be a paraphrase—Translator's note.] Under the law of nature, men, women and animals were equals, and therefore all varieties of incest are legal (a minor detail of free love), because they are natural, and even cannibalism is legal ("*because all elements are contained in all things, and pervade everything*"). Violence, however, the source of all evils, was not legal under the law of nature, nor was the idea of the fatherland or money. Harmony with the universe would be the necessary result of the abolition of war and warriors, and of money and patriotism. Along the same lines, Epicurus, the founder of a later school of thought, discouraged his disciples from submitting to the regular Greek educational curriculum and condemned participation in politics. Like Diogenes, he was addressing the cosmopolitan individual, that great invention of the Greek world, and proposed that individuals withdraw from the public realm and live a quiet life surrounded by friends and lovers, based on a simple diet, the satisfaction of natural desires and the enjoyment of genuine pleasures, that is, wisdom and the absence of pain.

The teachings of the philosophical school of the Cynics, which include the teachings of Diogenes, therefore constituted the first primitivist critiques of civilization. Their appearance at the end of the classical period of Greece, in the midst of the full-blown crisis of the *polis*, reflected the contrast between the letter of the law and the dreary reality of everyday life. The civil wars between Sparta and Athens led to the collapse of the values of Greek civilization. The meanings of words changed and the civic virtues were transformed into their opposites due to the greed for power and partisan politics. Corruption and partisan conflicts had free rein. According to Thucydides: "*Thus religion was in honour with neither party; but the use of fair phrases to arrive at guilty ends was in high reputation. Meanwhile the moderate part of the citizens perished between the two, either for not joining in the quarrel, or because envy would not suffer them to escape*" (*The Peloponnesian Wars*). Shortly before this era, during the early period of Hellenism, the Greek cities suffered under the oppression of organized power and the favored classes. At that time,

no one felt that the laws protected them and therefore no one felt like a member of a civil community. Hegel said that, “*for philosophy to arise among a people, a rupture must take place in the actual world.*” Man takes refuge in thought when public life no longer satisfies him, when moral life has dissolved. The Greeks began to think about nature when they lost all interest in their world and everything around them was turbulent and unhappy. This phenomenon is not at all surprising. The Greeks did not conceive of man as emancipated from the universe or separated from nature, and thus they perceived no opposition between nature and man. The universe was an ordered world, the source of just relations, a model in which one could discover the social order “that is in conformance with nature”. The works of men could not be superior to the works of nature; at most, they could approach perfection to the extent that they inserted themselves into nature and reflected its order. With regard to this question, Epicurus said: “*If you do not on every occasion refer each of your actions to the ultimate end prescribed by nature, but instead of this in the act of choice or avoidance turn to some other end, your actions will not be consistent with your theories.*” The *polis* was a system based on the cosmic laws, a natural system that had been perverted, and had become something foreign, or “barbarous”. It was therefore “more Greek” to return to nature. Given the absence of the historical dimension of time among the Greeks, the end was only the beginning. The Romans experienced this same state of mind when the Republic fell. During the subsequent stage, that of the Roman Empire, the primitivist refusal underwent a resurgence as a myth in literature and as a reality in the periphery of the empire.

## 2. The Golden Age

During the Third Century B.C., Zeno the Stoic began his career with a description of a society in which there were no differences of personal status, or racial distinctions, or party politics, a kind of egalitarian world community devoted to sun worship. Ever since the time of Hesiod there was a primitivist tendency in Greek thought that conceived of life as it was lived in the distant past as the reign of Pan, a golden age of abundance, innocence and happiness. The poets sang of the Happy Isles inhabited by “heliopolitans”, and thanks to the historian Diodorus Siculus we know that flowers and fruits were plentiful there, and that nothing was owned by anybody; that everyone took turns using land, food and tools, and it goes without saying that promiscuity was generalized. Theocritus situated the pastoral scene in Sicily, but it was a rugged and inhospitable region of central Greece, Arcadia, that ultimately came to embody the myth of the original happy condition. Virgil, in his *Eclogues*, describes Arcadia as containing lush vegetation, perfect for meditation, in eternal spring, without suffering, where everything is leisure and love: “*Far from discord and weapons, the land that is so prodigal for justice provides an easy living.... Man has to do no more than pick the fruit from the branches and farmland is produced for his benefit spontaneously. He enjoys a repose without disturbance and an existence that is rich in various resources.*” [This appears to be a paraphrase rather than a quotation from the *Eclogues*—Translator’s note.] Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, provides a similar version of the beginnings of history, of the times “*before Saturn was deposed by Jupiter*”: “*when Man yet new,/No rule but uncorrupted reason knew:/And, with a native bent, did good pursue./Unforc’d by punishment, un-aw’d by fear,/His words were simple, and his soul sincere;/Needless was written law, where none opprest..../The teeming Earth, yet guiltless of the plough,/And unprovok’d, did fruitful stores allow.*” Saturn had to take refuge in Italy with its first inhabitants and according to Pompeius Trogus, “*The first inhabitants of Italy were the*

*Aborigines, whose king, Saturn, is said to have been a man of such extraordinary justice, that no one was a slave in his reign, or had any private property, but all things were common to all, and undivided, as one estate for the use of every one...*” The aspiration for happiness derived not from the impossible idea that a new society could be built, but from the evocation of a primeval paradise that would recur at the conclusion of a cycle that was characterized by decline and ruin. For the Roman Empire, this cycle began in the Third Century. From then on Gaul and Spain experienced massive uprisings of outcasts known as the *bagaudae* that could not be suppressed by large armies. The *bagaudae* were fugitive slaves, military deserters, impoverished dependent farmers, and city dwellers fleeing the destruction of the cities, who fled to the forests seeking the freedom that they could not enjoy in civilization. There, they formed gangs that expropriated landlords and besieged the cities, managing their internal affairs by means of a “natural” justice that was unrelated to that of the Empire, without magistrates or governors. In a dialogue that has been preserved from that era (*Querolus*), a citizen asks his *lares* to guide him to a place where he can be happy. They responded by telling him to go to the Loire Valley, the territory of the *bagaudae*, because “*Men live there under natural law. There is no suffering there. Capital sentences are proclaimed under the oaks and are engraved in bone. There, even the country people speak and the ordinary people pass judgment. You can do as you please...*” This is an account of the first primitivist revolt in history.

Neither the disintegration of the Empire nor the Germanic invasions destroyed the Greco-Roman world. It was the radical transformation with regard to how the world was viewed that was propagated by Christianity that was really responsible for the destruction of the Greco-Roman world. The gods abandoned the universe, which was now the exclusive creation of God, and cosmic harmony was broken for the benefit of man, who was made in God’s image. The anthropocentrically interpreted world was devalued and reality lost its substance in favor of the beyond. This was a transitional place, an episode in the transcendent drama of salvation. Spirit and the world, man and nature, were irremediably separated. This dualism prevailed in the West until the continuing development of the material and spiritual conditions of medieval society provoked the emergence of tensions and conflicts that led to the elaboration of two different approaches to the problem: one, that originated among the theologians, based on the disenchantment of the world pursued to its most extreme consequences; the other, inspired by the intellectuals, based on the exaltation of the culture of antiquity and the rediscovery of nature through observation and experience. Reform and Renaissance.

### **3. The Millennium**

Religious reform rejected the doctrine of salvation by way of the sacraments, and left man alone to face the consequences of his actions and forced him to rationalize his conduct. The world—and therefore civilization—was as a result even more deprecated than was the case under Catholicism. One more step in this direction led to the appearance of sects that turned their backs on the “world” and avoided any relations with non-believers. Attachment to the world was an impediment to the revelation of faith by the Holy Spirit, and therefore to the overcoming of irrational subjectivity (of the primitive state of man). In an attempt to adopt the lifestyle of the primitive Christians, the sects preached the community of goods and followed the Bible literally, rejecting any interpretation. Among the adepts of the Free Spirit, a sectarian movement that, under

various names, spread during the 13<sup>th</sup> century across a large part of Europe, the spiritual emancipation of man was pursued by way of the identification of God and the radical rejection of private property. One of the members of this sect, Johannes de Brünn, preached to his followers: “*Leave, leave, leave your homes, your horses, your possessions, your land, leave it, remember that nothing is yours, you possess everything in common...*” At first, however, the call to return to a lost Golden Age, to a natural egalitarian condition that could be realized in the present, a state that the Church Fathers had interpreted as the prelapsarian paradise, did not find many supporters, but when the message was propagated among the poor peasants and the impoverished people of the cities, as was the case in Flanders, Picardy and England (the revolt of John Ball), the idea became a revolutionary myth of the masses. Dissident preachers like John Wycliffe championed it and spread it throughout Europe, triggering revolutions in Bohemia, Germany, Holland, etc. (the Hussite revolt, the peasant wars, the *Bundschuh*, the Anabaptist movement). With the feudal world in full disarray, alongside the Protestant reformers an apocalyptic plebeian party announced the immanent arrival of the Holy Spirit and the return of 1,000 years of primal paradise, a classless and totally free society, in which authority would be abolished; the society lost since the Fall of Man, that is, since the advent of civilization. While the Protestant reformers prepared the world for capitalism, the plebeian party attacked “Babylon” (the commercial cities) and burned books. Although only a few radical factions actually practiced the community of goods—the Adamites, the extremist Taborites, certain groups of Anabaptists, etc.—all of them proclaimed the imminence of a kingdom of equality, where all will enjoy all the goods of nature, of river and forest, of fish and game, in common, and where all will receive what they need and where there will be no distinctions of status or estate and everyone will be like brothers and sisters; a kingdom that will be inaugurated at the end of a battle of extermination against the Anti-Christ and his hosts, that is, against the State, the Church and the ruling classes. As the agitator Thomas Müntzer proclaimed: “*On! On! On! Let not your sword grow cold, let it not be blunted. Smite, cling, clang, on the anvil of Nimrod, and cast the tower to the ground...*”, calling for the most complete social destruction. Nimrod was the builder of the Tower of Babel and was considered to be the first creator of cities, the inventor of private property and of class distinctions, that is, the destroyer of the primitive State of Nature.

The analysis made by Engels (*The Peasant War in Germany*) of these revolutions is erroneous. He judges that they were only capable of formulating a communist program in a “fantastic” form that could not be realized given the limited productive forces of that time. Not only does he succumb to the mistake of blaming them for not knowing things they could not have known, but he also judges them on the basis of ideas that had not even been conceived yet. Thus, by scorning the real content of the revolts he condemned himself to misunderstanding them, and under the appearance of “historical materialism” he simply asserted the debatable view that communism only became possible with the total development of the proletariat, or, which amounts to the same thing, with the full unfolding of the bourgeois conditions of production. It is true that, far from being primitive and chimerical elaborations of a nineteenth-century emancipatory project, those uprisings pursued the abolition of the feudal world via the extremist realization of the Christian ideal. The millenarianism of the peasant and urban plebs was precisely what they wanted it to be. It was not a movement against history because it remained on the terrain of the myth of the earthly paradise and was alien to the Protestant bourgeoisie. Its goals—the destruction of the Church and of the power of the princes, and the realization of the Millennium—were perfectly

possible under those historical conditions, and they did not require any other language for their expression.

#### 4. The Diggers

During the decline of the Middle Ages a sentiment began to be expressed in literature that reflected a yearning for the simple pastoral life and the dream of natural happiness, which represented, that is, the bucolic ideal, which revealed a vital desire for pleasure. The Ancient World was not so distant. In the particular conditions of the Italian cities, one of which was the existence of an educated class, a culture linked to antiquity flourished that awakened an interest in, and a desire to understand, nature. This attitude restored to nature the reality that Christianity had taken from it. The world was no longer represented as a rigid sphere with God—or the Earth—at the center, and was revealed to be infinite. Religion ceased to be the instrument that made the world intelligible and yielded this role to the testimony of the senses and experience. Religion no longer served as a veil for existence and nature became the field of action for human experience. But it must be recalled that this change of perspective, which was generalized at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, affected only the educated class of the cities, that is, the core population of the bourgeoisie. The uneducated classes that comprised the majority of the population were unaffected by this intellectual ferment and expressed their ideas in religious terms. As late as the time of the English Revolution we can still contemplate the attempt to use the Gospels to overthrow society. Gerrard Winstanley, the leading personality among the *Diggers*, a faction of the Levelers, replaced the word “God” with “Reason”, because “... *I have been held under darknesse by that word, as I see many people are*”. This Reason is a revealed Reason; a voice told him the news: “*work together and eat bread together, doth advance the law of Reason and Righteousnesse,*” but it also told him that hell does not exist and that heaven is within men. He referred, like all the rest of his predecessors, to a primal Golden Age. “*In the beginning of Time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation; for Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes....*”. The egoism of some men, however, created authority and servitude, and led them to appropriate the natural wealth that was the common property of all, especially the land, inventing arbitrary laws to justify their usurpation. The “Diggers” based freedom on the free enjoyment of the land and proclaimed that they must “*lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor, That every one that is born in the land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth, according to the Reason that rules in the Creation*”. They advocated an economy without money, organized around public storehouses where everyone would bring the products of their labor and from which everyone could take what they need. In practice, they broke down fences and occupied common lands and the lands of the nobility in order to cultivate them, carrying on the tradition of previous peasant rebellions by acknowledging the slogan of an unpartitioned land, without property lines or fences. They also refused to pay the tithe, they did not respect the rules regarding Sundays and they demanded the rule of natural justice and Reason without the mediation of judges and priests. Borrowing the words of Debord that were less justifiably applied to the peasant wars, we can say that the struggle of the Diggers was a “*revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, which is already a modern revolutionary tendency that as yet lacks the consciousness that it is only historical*”. This

shortcoming was the result of the separation between the educated and the uneducated classes, between spiritual and material necessity, since the popular classes, primarily the peasants (the English “yeomanry”), were trapped between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. It would be a constant feature of history that obliged the representatives of the bourgeoisie to clothe themselves in the vestments of the apocalypse. Even in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Georg Büchner wrote to his friends in the Young Germany group: “*Reform society by ideas? Impossible! Our epoch is altogether materialistic; if you were to act in a strictly political manner, you would soon reach the point where reform comes to an end on its own (...). And the majority class itself? For it, there are only two levers, material poverty and religious fanaticism. Every party that knows how to manipulate these two levers will be victorious. Our time needs steel and bread—and only later a cross or something else....*”

## 5. The Noble Savage

In 1493 Columbus sent a letter to the Secretary of the Catholic Kings, Luis de Santángel, summarizing the results of his voyage to “the Indies”: “*Hispaniola is a marvel. Its hills and mountains, fine plains and open country, are rich and fertile for planting and for pasturage, and for building towns and villages. The seaports there are incredibly fine, as also the magnificent rivers, most of which bear gold. The trees, fruits and grasses differ widely from those in Juana (...). The people of this island and all the others I have found or been informed of go about totally naked, men and women, naked as the day they were born, although some women cover one place with a leaf or a piece of cotton cloth they make for that purpose. They have no iron, nor steel, nor weapons, nor are they fit for them, because although they are well-made men of commanding stature, they appear extraordinarily timid (...). It is true that since they have gained more confidence and are losing this fear, they are so unsuspecting and so generous with what they possess, that no one who had not seen it would believe it. They never refuse anything that is asked for. They even offer it themselves, and show so much love that they would give their very hearts. Whether it be anything of great or small value, with any trifle of whatever kind, they are satisfied.*” The accounts of the Spanish and French explorers provide ample material for the reconstruction of the figure of the noble savage, an image of freedom that had been fragmented by the shattering of the unity of the Church, the State and earthly life. When Montaigne wanted to study “the human condition”, a very unusual topic for that era, he read the travelers’ accounts published in *Francia Antarctica*: “*what we now see in those nations, does not only surpass all the pictures with which the poets have adorned the golden age, and all their inventions in feigning a happy state of man, but, moreover, the fancy and even the wish and desire of philosophy itself; so native and so pure a simplicity, as we by experience see to be in them, could never enter into their imagination, nor could they ever believe that human society could have been maintained with so little artifice and human patchwork. I should tell Plato, that it is a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or political superiority; no use of service, riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no properties, no employments, but those of leisure, no respect of kindred, but common, no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of corn or wine; the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon, never heard of. How much would he find his imaginary republic short of this perfection?*” (*Essays*). Montaigne thought it fitting to call them barbarians if they were judged by reason, but not if the standard of judgment



would be a comparison with the civilized, who exceed them in barbarism. He did not even hesitate to claim that their language, of such an agreeable sound, recalled the accents of the ancient Greeks. He concluded by referring to the response that one of the indigenous people, who had been brought to France, gave to King Charles the Ninth. Asked about how people lived in his country, he shockingly raised the issue of the leveling of conditions: "... *they had observed, that there were among us men full and crammed with all manner of commodities, while, in the meantime, their halves were begging at their doors, lean and half-starved with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these necessitous halves were able to suffer so great an inequality and injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throats, or set fire to their houses.*"

The myth of the noble savage would be put to use as a political weapon of reason. In *The Adventures of Telemachus*, Fenelon would revisit the theme of "natural man" and would point to the latter's antagonism with civilized man: "*We look on the manners of these people as a beautiful fable, and they must needs look upon ours as a monstrous dream.*" In describing the delights of "Betica" he was actually talking about certain idealized Canadian aborigines. Its inhabitants live in tents, all together, without any possessive attitude towards the land, where there are gold and silver mines, although "*the inhabitants, plain and happy in their plainness, do not even deign to reckon gold and silver among their riches; they esteem nothing but what really subserves the wants of man.*" Furthermore, "*[a]s they had no foreign trade, they had no occasion for money. They are almost all shepherds or husbandmen. There are in this country few artificers, for they tolerate no arts but those which subserve the real necessities of man....*". Superfluous goods are for wicked men, slaves of the false needs upon which they mistakenly believe their happiness depends: "*They have no need of judges, for every man submits to the jurisdiction of conscience. They possess all things in common; for the cattle produce milk, and the fields and the orchards fruit and grain of every kind in such abundance that a people so frugal and temperate have no need of property.*" And, thanks to the fact that they flee from vain wealth and deceitful pleasures, they can remain united, free and equal, peaceful, monogamous and proud of their way of life: "*[t]he Beticans would forsake their country, or choose to die, rather than submit to servitude. It is therefore as difficult to subdue them, as they are incapable of desiring to subdue others.*" The content of this work follows a clear purpose: Fenelon contrasted the corrupt society of Louis XIV with a natural communism, showing, on the one hand, the incompatibility between the bourgeois world and absolutism, and, on the other hand, the political weakness of the incipient French bourgeoisie.

The expansion of the horizons of the world and of the possibilities inherent in it posed the problem of how man would live; the discovery of the American tribes contributed to the construction of a theory of the natural origin of society and the State that could be used to refute the contrary theory of divine origin. While in France this theory revolved around utopian constructs, in England, the country where royal power had been battered by a revolution, bourgeois formulations were much more carefully tailored. In 1609, Garcilaso de la Vega ordered that his *Royal Commentaries* be printed, in which he described the birth and development of the Inca state of Peru. He maintained that the Inca provided the proof of the existence of an almost perfect State that ruled, "*in accordance with the teachings of reason and natural law*", every minute of every day of the lives of its subjects. The Incan Empire had arisen from the primitive state of nature, free and egalitarian, thanks to the cities of a mythical founder, Manco Capac. The work was translated into French and English, and was influential among the enemies of absolute monarchy, especially John Locke. Thus, from the ranks of the *Whig* party, the bourgeois party that disputed power with the English monarchy and the aristocrats after the revolution, Locke

defined the state of nature as “a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection...” (*Of Civil Government: The Second Treatise*). According to Locke, this state was altered by the transgression of natural law that was brought about by the greed to possess more than what was necessary and the unwillingness of some people to work, which obliged the inhabitants to construct a contract-based society. The people, seeking protection, renounced part of their individual freedom and submitted to a superior power created by general agreement. The rationalist philosopher called “natural” what was in fact only “historical”. Natural law was nothing but the idealist formulation of the bourgeois social norm.

## 6. Natural Law

If the “geometrical” consideration of nature characteristic of rationalist philosophy (such as that of Descartes or Spinoza) deduced enormous potentials for man within the confines of nature, expressed in the idea of the perfectibility and progress of civilization, for other authors (such as Pascal), the disenchantment of the world by science and reason revealed an infinite cosmic void, foreign to the human being, provoking an existential disorder in man, who was now lost in a little corner of the universe. This latter perspective led to the renunciation of the world and to religion. As the contradictory side of civilization began to be revealed, doubts arose regarding the guarantees of freedom and happiness that the progress of science and the arts was supposed to bring in its wake. The great debate of the century of the Enlightenment was that of nature or civilization, progress “of the arts” or moral progress. For some, one could be happy in ignorance; culture caused inequality and was the source of error, unhappiness and poverty. For others, exactly the opposite was true. Modern thought, however, was irremediably separated from the idea of God and gravitated towards life, for which contemplative retirement could not be the solution. According to Abbe Raynal the study of the lives of primitive peoples must have the purpose of making “*the ignorance of the savage shed light in some way on the civilized peoples.*” In the discussions of the savage, therefore, three positions can be delineated. One followed the path of utopia. In 1753 Morelly’s *Wreck of the Floating Isles, or Basiliad of the Celebrated Pilpai* was published, which was an apology for natural anarchy and a veritable manual of primitivism. On a blessed isle there lived an innocent and free people who knew how to reject the temptations of laziness and wickedness and attended to nature’s harmonious message, which rather than hindering, actually enhance passions and desires. On this isle there was neither property, nor marriage, nor religion nor privilege. Luxury and the accumulation of wealth were forbidden. Society, formed without an explicit contract, was composed of small communities that practiced agriculture and the arts and engaged in mutual aid, obeying no other law than nature. As for culture, they only needed one book that covered everything. Another position, which is indebted to Hobbes, paints the life of the savage in the most somber of colors. According to this view, the primitive man, far from being happy, suffers from hunger and countless afflictions that make him a ferocious and cruel being, and that drive him to a perpetual state of war against all other men. To escape such a risk-filled condition he had to enter into an agreement not to harm the others and to help them when they needed help. Holbach maintained that the savages, because they

were deprived of reason, cannot be free, and that freedom in the hands of beings without either culture or virtue was like a knife in the hands of a child: “*The Savage Life or the state of nature towards which some sad thinkers have wanted to drag mankind, the golden age that was so highly praised by the poets, is actually only a state of poverty, of imbecility, and of irrationality. Inviting us to participate in such a life means that we are being told that we should return to our infancy, that we should forget everything we know, that we should renounce the enlightenment that our minds have been able to acquire: meanwhile, unfortunately for us, our reason is still quite underdeveloped, even in the most civilized nations*” (*Système Social*). Freedom therefore depends on a society ruled by law that is inspired by nature, whose goal must be human happiness. Abbe Marly, halfway between Holbach and Morelly, suggested the happy medium was “perfect equality” obtained by means of the community of goods, since property engendered avarice and ambition, passions that the legislator had to combat (*On Legislation or the Principle of Law*). Marly advocated Spartan equality, the enemy of science and the arts, since the latter had separated man from the state of nature, and Athenian freedom, based on the total transfer of authority to the social body. A third position, that of Rousseau, who followed in the footsteps of Locke, simultaneously rehabilitated the egalitarian primitive community and also consecrated the State with the popular will and the “contract”. This is the content of the *Discourse on Inequality*. For Rousseau inequality did not exist in the state of nature, it only made its appearance when man emerged from that state, when he formed society: “*The moment one man needed the help of another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the fast forests changed into smiling Fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with harvests.*” This period corresponds with the introduction of agriculture and metallurgy. From the cultivation of the land one arrived at the division of the land and from there at property. The arts brought with them an endless series of needs that seized upon man. Then, as a corollary, came exploitation and wars, laws and institutions. As a result, civilized man has lived under the constraints of superfluous desires and artificial passions. But “*When savage man has eaten, he is at peace with all nature and the friend of all those like him (...) since savage man desires only things which he knows and knows only things which he is capable of possessing or which are easy to acquire, nothing should be as tranquil as his soul and nothing as limited as his mind.*” With regard to the balance sheet of advantages and disadvantages, the civilized world was in the red, because we never found a savage who wanted to become civilized but there were many cases of civilized people who went to live among the savages. The novel explanation for this fact was that happiness had nothing to do with reason but with feeling. Finally, by considering freedom as a gift of nature and property as a social convention, Rousseau provided a decisive argument for egalitarianism, and exercised more influence than any other author on the French Revolution, Romanticism and Socialism.

The publication of Bougainville’s *Voyage Round the World* in 1771 gave rise to discussions concerning the state of nature and the image of the savage. Once again, the depiction of a natural and happy world was transformed into the mirror where civilized society could identify its malaise and its misfortune. Tahiti, with its voluptuous nature and the sexual freedom of its inhabitants, became the focal point of the moral preoccupations of the era. The savage continued to be the cause of the nostalgic dream of a virtuous and happy life in harmony with nature. Diderot would express this better than anyone else in his “Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville”: “*How far we are from nature and happiness! The empire of nature cannot be destroyed. However much you*

*handicap it with obstacles it will endure (...)* How short the code of nations would be if it conformed rigidly to the law of nature. How many errors and vices man would be spared!" Civilized taboos will never be able to eradicate man's natural inclinations, at most they can dissimulate them, to his misfortune: "Would you like an abridged account of almost all our wretchedness? Here it is. There existed a natural man. There was introduced into this man an artificial man: and a civil war, enduring the whole of life, arose in the cavern. Sometimes the natural man is the stronger, sometimes he is struck down by the moral and artificial man. In either case the poor monster is pulled about, pinched with tweezers, tortured, stretched on the wheel." Diderot resolves the dilemma of whether one should civilize man or abandon him to his instincts in the following manner: "If you aspire to be a tyrant, civilize him.... Do you wish him to be happy and free? Then do not meddle in his affairs." For Diderot the history of political, civil and religious institutions was nothing but the history of tyranny over the human species. In the final analysis, if you have to choose between civilization and nature, "Really I cannot say. But this I know. Townsmen have several times been seen to strip themselves and return to the forest. The woodsman has never put on clothes and come to the town." The enlightened man did not renounce civilization, nor did he seriously consider the advisability of putting an end to progress. The opposition between nature and reason was insuperable using only the instruments of reason, but the philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was absolutely unaware of this. What Marx called "eighteenth century Robinsonades" were in reality an anticipation of the bourgeois society that had been in gestation since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this society based on contract, each individual was dispossessed of all natural bonds, bonds that in the medieval era had made him an integral and indivisible part of society. The savage was the idealization of the isolated individual that was a product of the dissolution of the feudal world. The idea of the savage was an outcome of history rather than the starting point of history.

## 7. Equality

During the French Revolution, the specifically bourgeois current as well as the "sans culottes" constantly invoked nature and its designs, swearing by Rousseau or Marly. The agitator Anacharsis Cloots, a self-proclaimed "citizen of humanity", claimed to have discovered his political system, "The Republic of the Human Race", by consulting nature. Taking an example at random, the oration of the Abbe Fauchet before the "The Friends of Truth", we read: "Man was originally a product of nature in the fullness of his existence and in society; he was established in the midst of its realm in order to enjoy the good things of life, to take from it what he needs to survive, to sweeten and to embellish his existence, and to accumulate by means of his personal efforts the goods supplied by nature (...). He got enjoyment out of his existence; he took possession of his domain; he identified the gifts that were destined for his use; he increased his pleasure by the exercise of the faculties that enabled him to make constant improvements: labor was not a punishment for him; it was an agreeable elaboration of his power and his genius. He was happy as a result of the serenity of reason and the sweet society which doubled his happiness by the help of his neighbor; he was happy due to the generosity of the earth and the simple efforts that multiplied his pleasures; such was the state of man in the golden age of nature.... Man was born free; this beautiful faculty was given to him so that he could rise to the challenge of his destiny and in order to second the intentions of nature, which was so favorable for him...." By living in society man separated himself from nature and turned his back on its principles, and suffered tyranny and injustice. Man can never return to

the golden age but something of that age can be reproduced if society were to be ordered in such a way that *“all have something, and each does not have too much”*, in brief, if it can be ordered in accordance with the ways of nature: *“It is upon natural law that legal institutions must be based for the first time. The model is neither ancient Greece nor ancient Italy; it is immutable nature: the social order must adapt to nature, or else the human race will be eternally miserable (....) Opinion rises to the level of nature: men want to be happy and just; and they will be because their will is totally united in favor of happiness and justice. No power can resist them when nature is on their side, when they march freely under its commands....”* According to Marat, man in nature, in order to defend himself from the oppression and injustice inflicted on him by others, has the right to rebel, rob, subjugate and kill if necessary. The unrestricted exercise of this right would have led to a permanent state of war and in order to escape this fate man renounced some of the advantages of nature in favor of the advantages of living in society: *“he renounced his natural rights in order to enjoy his civil rights”*; in short, he signed a social contract. *“Thus, the rights of nature acquired, by means of the social contract, a sacred character. Because men all received the same rights from nature, they must have equal rights in the social condition.”* But the contract may be broken if there are privileged persons who enjoy themselves at the expense of the poor: *“justice and wisdom demand that at least part of these goods should be destined, by way of a judicious allocation, to be shared out among the citizens who have nothing; for the honest citizen abandoned to poverty and to hopelessness by society, returns to the state of nature and therefore has the right to demand with weapons in hand not only the benefits that he had not renounced but to obtain other greater benefits as well”* (*“The Constitution”*). This was a unique expression of the right to insurrection, which Marat called, in accordance with the political jargon of the era, *“the return to nature”*. The French revolutionaries were becoming more and more aware of the danger posed by the inequality of fortunes, or, which amounts to the same thing, class differences. The most radical among them suggested compulsory equalization, a leveling of property that pointed towards the idea of common property, but their proposals were at first limited to subordinating property rights to the interests of society, thus undermining its basis. For the deputy from La Meuse, Harmand, *“equality of rights was a gift of nature and not a favor granted by society”*. For the Republican Antonelle, *“nature did not produce property owners, just as it did not produce the nobility; it only produced beings with nothing, equal in their needs as in their rights.”* The struggle for equality was the crowning moment of the Revolution and its most enduring demand, but the appeal to communism took place on the occasion when the bourgeoisie separated itself from the plebeians and persecuted them ruthlessly. For the conspirator Babeuf, too, property was not a natural right; to the contrary, *“the condition of community is the only just condition, the only good condition, the only condition that is in conformance with the pure sentiments of nature and outside of that condition peaceful and truly happy societies cannot exist”*. In order for the dispossessed to believe that communism is more than just a dream they will have to recognize that *“the fruits of labor are for all and the land is owned by no one”*.

Primitivist communism was the last upwelling of the French Revolution and the first form that expressed the future emancipatory ideology of the proletariat, the last class produced by history.

## 8. *Terra Incognita*

The rational understanding of the world created the foundations for a new freedom at the same time that it unleashed the forces that would hinder its realization. The domain of nature, far from achieving freedom for man, subjugated him more completely than religious despotism. Science and reason were no better than revelation and the divine will. The advent of industrial civilization, offspring of applied science and technical progress, with its long train of destructive consequences, entailed the worst slavery: wage labor. The instrumental fruits of Reason gave birth to a monstrous civilization in which both man and nature were devastated. The opposition between the city and the countryside grew more pronounced than ever. The people of the countryside saw how the new laws passed by the bourgeoisie deprived the majority of them of their means of subsistence, and they were expelled and concentrated in the most pestilential quarters of the cities. The cities grew in size and became more and more ugly at the cost of an enslaved mass of human labor power and prisoners of misfortune. The individual experienced, in the form of boredom and neurosis, the disparity between his abstract freedom and the social repression of his impulses. The confrontation between the ever-narrowing world and the hypertrophied individual took the form of a unique ideological product: Romanticism. The Romantics set feeling and passion, or nature, against reason and progress, or society. Chateaubriand formulated the individual drama: *“Let us listen to the voice of our conscience. What does it tell us about Nature? ‘It is free.’ And about Society? ‘It rules.’”* They directed their curiosity towards the past, towards the adolescence of man, to unknown epochs. For Victor Hugo primitive man was not separated from the divine and that is why his way of thinking was composed of dreams and his language was poetry: *“Before the epoch which modern society has dubbed ‘ancient,’ there was another epoch which the ancients called ‘fabulous,’ but which it would be more accurate to call ‘primitive’.... In primitive times, when man awakes in a world that is newly created, poetry awakes with him. In the face of the marvellous things that dazzle and intoxicate him, his first speech is a hymn simply. He is still so close to God that all his meditations are ecstatic, all his dreams are visions. His bosom swells, he sings as he breathes. His lyre has but three strings—God, the soul, creation; but this threefold mystery envelopes everything, this threefold idea embraces everything. The earth is still almost deserted. There are families, but no nations; patriarchs, but no kings. Each race exists at its own pleasure; no property, no laws, no contentions, no wars. Everything belongs to each and to all. Society is a community. Man is restrained in nought. He leads that nomadic pastoral life with which all civilizations begin, and which is so well adapted to solitary contemplation, to fanciful reverie. He follows every suggestion, he goes hither and thither, at random. His thought, like his life, resembles a cloud that changes its shape and its direction according to the wind that drives it. Such is the first man, such is the first poet. He is young, he is cynical. Prayer is his sole religion, the ode is his only form of poetry. This ode, this poem of primitive times, is Genesis.”* (Preface to *Cromwell*). This spirit gave rise to an unusual interest in traditions, legends and popular songs, but also in virgin, mysterious nature, situated on the edge of the world, in “*terra incognita*”: *“The memory of a distant country overflowing with an abundance of all the gifts of nature, the image of a wild and lush vegetation, reanimated and fortified the spirit; oppressed in the present, we take delight in getting away from our condition in order to enjoy that simple grandeur that characterized the infancy of the human race”* (Alexander Von Humboldt, *The Legend of El Dorado*). Exotic countries, especially “the Orient”, became the focus of interest (“*Spain was still the Orient*”). A feverish passion developed for virgin islands (*Robinson Crusoe* and *Paul and Virginia* were set on islands). Imagination was set above reason,

emotion above logic and intuition above experience. The lost connections with nature—and with divinity—could not be reconstituted with the help of reason. Freedom was the most valuable good of man that society could not guarantee; it was sought outside of society, on its margins, among the fugitives, the bandits, rebel peoples and savages. Society was irremediably corrupt. An Indian Chief said: *“I began to grasp that this hateful mixture of ranks and fortunes, of extraordinary opulence and excessive poverty, of crime without punishment and sacrificed innocence, forms what in Europe is called society. That is not how it is with us: among the longhouses of the Iroquois there are no great or small men, no rich or poor, but hearts at peace and freedom of man everywhere.”* Nature not only appeared as the dream of freedom, rooted in a natural community held together by feeling, but also as the goal towards which society itself had to aim: *“Can it be otherwise than that the highest degree of civilization connects with nature?”* (Chateaubriand, *The Natchez*). The absolute liberty that was proclaimed and the society that existed could not be more irreconcilable; Shelley said that if men were created by Jupiter, they could also destroy him. The solution appeared to lie in revolution, but the Romantics were more tourists than revolutionaries. In any case, the solution did not lie in civilization; returning to Chateaubriand: *“Civilisation has reached its highest point, but a materialistic barren civilisation, which can produce nothing, since one can only create life through morality; one can only forge nations by Heavenly means: railroads only carry us more swiftly towards the abyss.”* The present was no longer seen as a beginning but as an end; the Romantic generation had become pessimistic and simply looked back to the past. The multiple faces of disillusionment transformed the Romantic ideology into an idealization of the past and a defense of archaic forms of authority, reflecting the new form of post-revolutionary rule, the fruit of the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the backward classes that were in decline. In this spiritual atmosphere naturalist theories suffered a profound setback at the hands of German idealism. By seeking to situate man within historical becoming, that is, at the end of a long series of civilizations, Hegel definitively ruined enlightenment political thought and its Romantic heirs. Later, the Hegelians Marx and Bakunin would proclaim to the four winds that freedom and equality were social rather than natural facts, and that the proletariat, oppressed humanity, must seek them among the debris of bourgeois civilization and not in untamed nature.

## 9. Freedom

This change of perspective that Hegel’s works meant for the 19<sup>th</sup> century was total and was completely absorbed by socialist thought, forcing the latter to break not only with the Christian metaphysic and bourgeois positivism but also with the Rousseauian ideology of the Revolution. It is often forgotten that Bakunin came of age in the Hegelian left and that the origins of anarchism are incomprehensible without taking this into account. Bakunin considered Rousseau to be the worst of all the bourgeois ideologists on the basis of the assumption that a social contract legitimized the State, a brutal and primitive form of social organization. It was assumed that before the advent of the State man was free but Bakunin thought otherwise about natural freedom: *“It is nothing but the absolute dependence of the ape-man under the permanent pressure of the external world.”* The freedom of primitive man depended on his solitude: *“The freedom of one of them does not require the freedom of any other; to the contrary, every one of these individual liberties is based on itself alone, it exists on its own, and therefore the freedom of each necessarily appears as the negation of the freedom of all the others, and all of them, should they meet, must limit and*

*restrict each other mutually, they must contradict each other and destroy each other...*” Up to this point Bakunin is repeating what Holbach said; but now he parts company with him completely: *“Man does not really become man, he does not conquer the possibility of his internal emancipation unless he manages to break the chains of the slavery that external nature imposes upon all living beings.”* Humanity was born the slave of nature and its freedom begins when humanity is emancipated from nature, that is, when it becomes civilized. From that point on a series of historical circumstances determine man: *“Man does not create society; he is born within it. He is not born free, but enslaved, the product of a particular social environment created by a long series of past influences, of historical developments and events (...). It could be said that the collective consciousness of any society, embodied in both the great public institutions as well as in all the details of its private life upon which all its theories are based, forms a kind of environment, a kind of intellectual and moral atmosphere, one that is harmful but absolutely necessary for the existence of all its members.”* Freedom and individuality itself were not natural facts but historical products created by human society: *“Society, far from reducing and limiting, to the contrary creates the freedom of human individuals”*; and further, *“the freedom of individuals is not an individual but a collective fact, a collective product”*, which argument he uses to refute the individualist workers, whom he defined as “false brothers”. Marx said the same thing: *“Man is, in the most literal sense, a zoon politikon, not just a social animal, but an animal that can only become an individual within society”* (*Grundrisse*). The cosmopolitan Bakunin imagined man living outside of all society, in a desert, and concluded: *“If he does not miserably perish, which is the most probable result, he will become nothing but a boor, an ape, lacking speech and thought”*. He even criticized the communitarian spirit of pre-bourgeois societies which he called “natural patriotism”, even though the solidarity of trades and communities was decisive in the first stages of the workers movement: *“The less civilization prevails in human communities, the less complicated and the more simple is the very basis of social life and the more intensely is natural patriotism expressed. Whence we may deduce that natural patriotism is inversely related to civilization, that is, to the triumph of humanity...”*. However, it was *“the barbarians who represent, today, the faith in the human destiny and the future of civilization, while the civilized can no longer achieve their salvation except in barbarism.”*

Even so, in socialism the victory over primitivism was not total. In his *Origins of the Family*, Engels started from the basis of the primitive community: *“At all earlier stages of society production was essentially collective, just as consumption proceeded by direct distribution of the products within larger or smaller communistic communities.”* At the beginning, then, was the state of nature, the golden age that was perverted according to Engels by the division of labor, which successively gave rise to livestock raising, agriculture, metalworking and trade. Then came private property, the accumulation of wealth, and finally, the formation of classes in conflict, and then the State was born in order to maintain a balance in the class struggle. This was a reading of Rousseau and Hobbes in a socialist key, accompanied by a quantity of data from historical and ethnographic research. Kropotkin, for his part, would try to prove solidarity as a social principle by looking in nature, which contains abundant examples of animal solidarity (*Mutual Aid*). He would introduce an authentic theoretical breakthrough by reducing anarchism to a mere Darwinist sociology and by making the methodology of the natural sciences the guiding procedure of social analysis. After Kropotkin, the roots of Bakunin’s thought would fall into oblivion and it was normal to read Rousseauian discussions in anarchist publications. Working class socialism, meanwhile, had become reconciled to bourgeois society as a necessary but inevitable evil and, as a result of this positive evaluation of the historical role of the bourgeoisie, it was only a



short step to the rehabilitation of the idea of progress and the embrace of science and economic development. The proletariat, by renouncing its own past, by forgetting that its movement had made its debut with a bloody struggle against industrialization that did not hesitate to destroy machines, factories and commodities, and by ignoring the fact that its own interests demanded the destruction of the labor market rather than its control, took this step. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, became more and more stratified, and became more reactionary as a result of its position in the hierarchical class order, and restricted its actions to defending its privileges and forgetting about the general interest. As the bourgeoisie abandoned all the reformist whims that previously, when it was revolutionary, had formed its own patrimony, the proletariat, socialist as well as anarchist, made those same demands its own. Anarchism, for example, constructed an entire field of culture out of them: the idea of progress, individualism, education for all, opposition to war, defense of nature, family planning, birth control and the other themes of women's liberation, sexual freedom, health and nutrition, the dissemination of scientific knowledge, etc. But despite the fact that the emancipatory project of the workers had been enriched with new concrete contents that were previously the property of the bourgeoisie, it nonetheless experienced a setback. Social democracy became a reformist movement. Revolutionary Marxism and anarchosyndicalism were the two attempts to overcome this setback.

## 10. Nowhere

The worker of one hundred years ago could be defined by his dependence on machinery. The machine had split the artisan into technology and worker. The goal pursued was the rationalization of labor and the principal consequence, the ejection of the worker from the process of production. This process having reached its limit with automation, we obtain a producer expelled from production (with a totally depreciated wage) and a consumer who is absolutely dependent on machines. The collective use of machinery changed nothing with regard to the worker's condition, and thus changed nothing with regard to the nature of his exploitation, but only changed the leadership of the process, which was now in the hands of experts or managers. As a result, the proletariat that was thus split in two could not overcome itself, that is, free itself, by way of the development of the machine or its communist use, but by way of its disappearance. It is true that in some socialist currents there were complaints about a "working class" civilization conceived as a copy of the bourgeois civilization, but they were few and only influenced a minority. It is significant that, as if acknowledging the unlikelihood of the realization of their proposals, they presented their theories in the form of utopian narratives. For example, in *The American Anarchist City* [1914] by the anarchist Pierre Quirole, we read: "*It is true that everything that exists, the product of labor, must belong to the workers. But the latter are deceiving themselves if they want to 'continue' rather than 'innovate'; for we must not imagine any concept of a new society made in the mold of the current one; if we did, it would not be worth the effort to move one little finger to help bring it about. Everything that exists must be replaced by something more rational and in conformance with real human needs. And Super denied that coal mines, and the dreadnoughts of the sea, and the fiery dragons of the rails, and the herculean automatons of the steelworks, are factors that contribute to human well-being, happiness and freedom; he denied that the electric trolleys that fill our streets represent progress; that the tunnels and underground railways are necessary; or that the great electrical generation plants that give us power and light represent a benefit for mankind...*"

All of these creations born of a sick civilization are condemned to disappear with the victory of the real revolution because, “*to continue exploiting the mines, to keep the trains and electric trolleys running, to keep the lights on as we did in capitalist society, to keep the factories and workshops in operation, to take advantage, in short, of everything that currently exists, all these sources of profit, regardless of what is done to perfect the machines and the means of production, for the purpose of alleviating and relieving the burden of labor, and to act on behalf of the condition of the producers charged with their management, will always amount to accepting the existence of an army of slaves eternally chained to the same amount of demoralizing and unrewarding labor...*” Therefore, the idea of the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, as such, implies consequences that are opposed to the libertarian goal. The legacy of a social organization that was complicated, regimented and centralized by technology was a poisoned legacy.

For his part, the socialist William Morris conceived of the free society as the result of a process of reversing the ruin and depopulation of the rural villages brought about by capitalism: “*People flocked into the country villages, and, so to say, flung themselves upon the freed land like a wild beast upon his prey; and in a very little time the villages of England were more populous than they had been since the fourteenth century, and were still growing fast (...) People found out what they were fit for, and gave up attempting to push themselves into occupations in which they must needs fail. The town invaded the country; but the invaders, like the warlike invaders of early days, yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people; and in their turn, as they became more numerous than the townsmen, influenced them also...*” (*News from Nowhere*). In both cases a kind of return to pre-capitalist conditions is advocated, but this return is to be accompanied by the experience gained by fighting against capitalism. A conscious return that does not reject the knowledge acquired in the past and rather than establishing limits to technology, it oriented its use to the achievement of a free society of equal producers.

## 11. The Country of Naturia

In fin de siècle Paris a certain Henri Zisly lived, an anarchist railroad worker, a contributor to various magazines such as *Temps Nouveaux*, an editor of *L'Etat Naturel* and the author of a *Voyage to the Beautiful Country of Naturia* [*Voyage au beau pays de Naturie*, 1900]. He was the first person to champion the cause of a nature that was enslaved by industrial progress. For the anarchists generally, nature was made for all free and equal men and the transgression of its laws was the source of all social evils. Bakunin's coffin had been sealed with seven seals. In nature harmony reigned, that is, it lacked contradictions. Anarchy was its norm. The social revolution meant the abolition of the divorce between man and nature and the return to the natural life, via the natural association of producers. The peculiarity of Zisly resided in his disagreement with the standard view when it came to the means to be employed. For most anarchists, firm believers in progress, the separation between man and nature would be overcome thanks to science and reason. For them, the natural organization of society was the same thing as the scientific organization of society. Humanity was advancing towards freedom arm in arm with science and the antagonism between civilization and nature would be abolished. Zisly, however, did not believe in the beneficent powers of science or in those of industrial civilization; “*our science is the science of life, the science of nature*”. With great foresight he blamed technological progress for the disappearance of the forests, the disasters of pollution, climate change, and the illnesses

and degenerative conditions affecting plants, animals and humans. “*Civilization is evil and Nature is good*”, he concluded, and that is why he fought “*against the monster of civilization and for the advent of Integral Nature*”. He recognized that the emancipation of the working class was a prerequisite for a return to the natural state. For the emancipation of the working class involved the reconstruction of the natural state of the earth that had been corrupted by civilization and a return to a primitive state of humanity. How could this be achieved? By obeying the laws of nature. Avoiding trade and industry. Abolishing private property and anti-natural needs. Happiness would come from the satisfaction of basic needs like food, drink, clothing, shelter, labor, love.... In his list of the things we can do without, we find artificial lighting, stoves, bicycles, the gramophone, wine, blouses, and windows and sheet metal. In the “normal life” amidst the full enjoyment of “freedom in Integral Nature” the whole world goes on foot and lives in cabins or at the most in houses made of stone, without dancing, theater, auto races or bullfights.

Zisly was the first advocate of the naturist current in the libertarian milieu, and far from devoting our attention to the silliness of his claims or the simplicity of his alternatives, we shall interpret his role as that of a defender of nature in harmony with man, a precondition of his emancipation. Zisly and his friends had a better understanding than anyone else of that time of the fact that the destruction of the natural environment was the consequence of the technological colonization (or artificialization) of society, or to put it another way, of the domestication of man by machines. The exploitation of nature was the other side of the coin of the exploitation of man. The bourgeoisie identified progress with economic development. This progress meant that nature was exclusively the stage for the unfolding of the productive forces and the backdrop for wage slavery. The degradation of nature proceeded in tandem with the degradation of the worker. Anarcho-naturism, an eminently pedagogical tendency, contributed to the program of social redemption the demand for a balance between nature and humanity without which equality and freedom would be impossible. While nature had to be humanized, man had to be naturalized. The influence of anarcho-naturism is demonstrated by the policy statement on libertarian communism of the 1936 Zaragoza Congress of the CNT: “... *those communes which reject industrialization, the naturists and nudists, for instance, may agree upon a different model of coexistence and will be entitled to an autonomous administration released from the general commitments. Since such naturist/nudist communes (or communes of some other sort) will be unable to satisfy their own needs, however limited these needs may be, their delegates to congresses of the Iberian Confederation of Autonomous Libertarian Communes will be empowered to enter into economic contacts with other agricultural and industrial communes.*”

## 12. Potlatch

The disenchantment of the primitive by ethnography, anthropology and archaeology must shed light on the crossroads before which the civilized world stands, rather than confuse it with nebulous ideologies. Contemporary primitive societies employ little time in labor that is necessary for survival; thus, they are not the false primitives who are forced to engage in a constant search for food, for they never work more than is necessary to meet their needs, that is, they are anti-work societies. They are not subsistence societies; they are capable of accumulating a surplus of food above and beyond their needs, but they only do so in order to consume it or waste it, rather than use it for trade. The kind of relations that govern their societies are not based on exchange or

barter because scarcity is unknown, but on the “gift”. They are therefore societies without markets. This detail might be useful for those who desire to recover the advantages of primitive life for the free and civilized society. The indigenous peoples of the northwest coast of North America engaged in contests of sumptuary gift-giving in order to humble, challenge or compel their rivals, which they called “potlatch”. This was an explosion of totally unproductive wastefulness, whose goals were prestige and glory. It was on the basis of this practice that Georges Bataille offered his suggestion about how to overcome the conflict between civilization and savagery. From this perspective the excesses of technology can be rectified. What technology builds, man destroys. Technology acquires a new role, that of extending the possibilities of dilapidation. Civilization cannot survive unless it destroys itself in one gigantic potlatch. The social revolution was the highest form of potlatch. Civilization’s only historical justification was its revolutionary overthrow, when its surpluses would have to be liberated for destruction. This scorn for wealth and rejection of the fruits of labor was the real luxury, the luxury of the poor and the refutation of the work ethic preached by domination. The permanent revolution received a surprising theoretical confirmation. Ultimately, this competitive destruction was not just a natural form of leveling, but was also the finally discovered procedure that would permit the reconciliation of man and the world. It might be objected that the dynamic of destruction and construction is precisely what characterizes capitalist civilization, but there is one important difference: the active subject is different in this case. And the meaning of the process is logically different, and indeed the opposite.

The primitivist critique of civilization must be of interest to those who believe that the human ends—freedom and happiness—can only be achieved with the dismantling the apparatus of production, de-urbanization and life in community. We cannot, however, overlook the danger that an erroneous formulation of the problem entails, with the elevation of nature to a supreme principle (for example, nature equals anarchy), for this would transform nature into a weapon to be used against thought and against freedom. The abdication of the human spirit in favor of nature, or the reduction of man to pure nature, would imply a degradation of thought into irrational forms. To proclaim the superiority of primitive man by situating paradise in the Paleolithic era and original sin in the appearance of symbolic language, as John Zerzan does in his *Future Primitive*, does not help clarify the problem either, since the roots of human unhappiness are not to be found in language nor can human unhappiness be cured by means of a return to archaic times. The hunter-gatherer of the primitivists is nothing but an idealized reflection of the atomized and déclassé individual of mass society produced by late capitalism.

Nature is not the repository of the truth, only of the wild side. And civilization is not simply the locus of the lie; it is also the locus of history. Both have been subjugated by the independent power of the economy, which is why they are both intertwined and form part of each other. Dispossessed, separated from his works, submerged in alienation, man is just as alienated from nature as from civilization, but the latter is his battlefield. By making civilization his own, he will also make nature his own. As a result, it is not a matter of man escaping from civilization, but of creating a situation where civilization cannot escape from man’s control. Nature will recover its proper status only when man is free, and he will be free only when he controls his labor, that is, when the powers he has created which have become independent of him—the State, the economy, etc.—are destroyed. And then the knowledge that primitive societies were societies without economies and without States, because they did not allow the formation of any kind of

separate power, since they could not even conceive of the existence of desires for wealth, power or domination within them, might prove useful.

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