

Primitivism in Technological Society

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*"I am as free as nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran."*

"The Conquest of Granada", John Dryden, 17th century

As capitalism entered the phase of globalization, all of society was immersed in a technological system that imprisons and conditions it. Technological society is at the same time the most hierarchical and the most oppressive society. Power, authority and wealth have been concentrated in increasingly smaller groups, while oppression assumes new forms and spreads, penetrating every aspect of everyday life, and can do so all the more easily as the degree of technological saturation of society increases. Technology seduces its victims with a promise of freedom that engulfs and imprisons those who succumb to it. Uprooted and domesticated individuals survive in a space that has been re-defined by technology, in a technosphere, one that entails a way of life dominated by consumption, work, standardization, isolation and mobility. A world that is increasingly more artificial and uninhabitable emerges, sown with nuclear power plants, GMOs, shopping malls, highways, toxic waste dumps and residential zones, configuring a space where social control, predatory urbanism and environmental destruction can develop unhindered, and where the loss of collective autonomy and the moral and psychological collapse of individuals are endowed with a *carte blanche* for their boundless progress.

The resistance to the techno-capitalist project of total enslavement has been expressed in the form of the protest against developmentalism, in anti-nuclear contestation, in the defense of the territory and in the struggles against precariousness, but it is still a long way from unifying its anti-systemic proposals and formulating a radical project. In the meantime, it must ward off an internal threat, that posed by recuperation by the political system, corrupt mainstream reform groups, neutral ecologism or the pseudo-movements of the civil society type, those that are trying to reduce the real resistance movement to the mere choreography of the co-management of the catastrophe, a pure electoral base for the leaders of groups devoted to advocating the position that another form of capitalism is possible.

Another no less important danger is posed by false consciousness and ideological deviation. The anti-developmental critique is only just emerging. It is largely spontaneous and still lacks any perspective for reaching a unitary consciousness of the world. Under these circumstances,

the theoretical blank spaces can be badly filled with ideologies that seek to explain the world from a particular determination, from a limited and more or less abstract concept—such as the role that nature or wildness might play for primitivism—by means of *sui generis* simplifications based on sociological, ethnographic and anthropological discoveries.

One of these ideas is primitivism. It was born in the 1990s in the United States, the product of the confluence of the remnants of the counterculture, “deep” ecology and individualist and nature-oriented anarchism, and made its public debut in Seattle. Primitivism does not constitute a finished system, much to the contrary, since there are as many primitivisms as there are groups that reject civilized life and call for a return to nature, whatever that is, which is why we shall focus our criticism of primitivism on the ideas that are most often repeated by all its factions.

Primitivism has passed through two stages; in the first, it appeared in the form of an insufficient and fragmentary critique of modern society, which nonetheless contained a kernel of truth and at least partially clarified the perspective opened up by the anti-developmental struggles. By turning back to the primitive, it sought to overcome the contradiction between the oppressive capitalist system and the noble aspiration for freedom that is felt by human beings.

For that reason it constituted an advance. In its second stage, the current one, when it attempted to consolidate as an ideology and rejected the idea of revolution, it fell into a paralyzing fatalism that was more conducive to inspiring hiking trips than revolt, to the cooking workshop rather than the barricade, and became, much more so than the Black Bloc, an obstacle to the understanding of struggles and an excuse for inactivity. Then its ideology coincided with the nature motif with which the classical bourgeoisie imagined that it could exorcise the evils of its own civilization. In short, the primitivist Robinsonades have degenerated into a form of urban flight reminiscent of the bourgeois-idyllic fantasy of the countryside. The primitivists do not seek the roots of modern oppression in the historical appearance of capitalism, nor in the idea of “progress” that was contained already in the core of bourgeois ideology, but in the birth of what they call “civilization”, which most of them situate at about ten thousand years ago, when man passed from a way of life characterized by hunting and gathering to one that was characterized by herding and agriculture. Civilization as an idea was therefore opposed to that of “nature”, the kingdom of happiness, abundance, play and freedom, which they identified with Paleolithic society, preferably the Mousterian era, that of Neanderthal man.

Some primitivists, advocates of veganism, do not even accept hunting and imagine a past epoch where the ruminants provided the model for an exemplary life. They are supporters of permaculture, a variety of “sustainable” agriculture, and of eco-villages. For the primitivist, the “free society of free producers”, or “anarchy”, as they used to call it seventy years ago, is not a society that will be, but something from which they extract their poetry of the past, a society that already existed in the confines of prehistory, when, at the most, one million people with a life expectancy of less than thirty years inhabited the Earth. The life of freedom was identified with the nomadic lifestyle, with the Pacific tribes, with the reign of the instincts and the passions, with the “wild” condition, that is, one that was not domesticated by “civilization”, the source of all evils, of authority, of patriarchy, of property, of war, of slavery, of technology, of the city, of classes, of science, etc. This idea of primitive man is by no means recent and is far overshadowed by the notion of “*homo sylvaticus*”, the man of the forests, first documented in European codices from the 12th century that were based on ancient Greco-Latin and Judeo-Christian traditions. In the Middle Ages teleology had excavated an abyss between man and nature that was just as deep and as wide as the one that capitalist artificialization is now digging, which is why it is not at all

surprising that the stereotypes of the two eras should be similar. This myth would survive in the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the figure of the “noble savage”, elaborated on the basis of American or Australian models, and would even contaminate the rigorous analyses of thinkers like Marx and Engels, who also believed in a primitive communist Golden Age. The primitive has during this entire period been the reflected image that is opposed to the typical personality of any particular era: that of the medieval villager whose life was regulated by religion; that of the enlightened bourgeois who sought Reason in the code of nature; that of the revolutionary who aspired to a free society, fraternal and without aristocrats; or that of the romantic frustrated by the ugliness of capitalist industry; just as it is that of the mass-man of globalization in today’s world.

We could devote ourselves to discussing, with reference to the same sources, this alleged primitive freedom, since there is ample evidence that the custom of killing other human beings, seizing territories and destroying the environment was prevalent in very early stages of human evolution. If we turn to the matriarchal family, we are unable to distinguish between it and what now is called the single-parent family, which is not exactly a factor conducive to freedom. On the other hand, agrarian societies were not necessarily class societies, nor did the Neolithic period absolutely coincide with an “agricultural revolution” that gave rise to hierarchy, the city and “civilization”. Historical and anthropological studies, however, are not the strong suit of primitivist ideology, which only has resort to them to give shape and unity to its discourse, rather than in order to get closer to the truth. Because man, and society, are defined by the way they appropriate the fruits of nature, it is absurd to imagine an epoch where this was not the case, and human behavior was identical to that of the animals. The evil “civilization” of the primitivists is nothing but a moment of history. From the dawn of humanity and over the whole course of its historical development, the human creature has never found freedom and happiness in a pure state. Neither his initial stages nor his latest ones, however, no matter how hard it is for us to believe this, have been epochs of simple barbarism. Oppression compelled the creation of the concept of freedom. Every instance of barbarism has also been an instance of culture. Artisanal knowledge, philosophical and ethical thought, literature, art, medicine, scientific knowledge, law, psychoanalysis, etc., have all provided enough material to develop egalitarian social consciousness and orient conduct towards freedom and the realization of desire. History has not been a mistake, or a deviation from a happy age. By referring back to previous epochs as if he wanted to escape from history, the primitivist identifies the process of humanization of the world with that of the domestication and artificialization of man. Such a reduction condemns freedom to the status of a mere detail of a utopian dream, one that is just as impossible to attain as the return to the state of nature, when in reality freedom is only the reward of the victorious struggle against barbarism, and therefore against that same domestication and artificialization. To use a sylvan metaphor, freedom is thus not the consequence of life in the forests, but the fruit of the struggle against deforestation. Freedom is not a lost natural state but a social reality that is reformulated at each historical moment.

The rejection of the class struggle, its organizational forms, its solidarity projects, and its revolutionary goals, cannot fail to have consequences when the time comes for action. The primitivist tends to ignore the struggles of the oppressed, just as he ignores History, since according to him these struggles have never pursued anything but power. Since he does not aspire to change society but to flee from it, he does not feel that he is implicated in its conflicts. We shall not ridicule his attempts to go back to nature since everyone knows that such a return to paradise is impossible

and he only refers to this goal as a source of inspiration. But this inspiration does not bring him closer to reality, it does not reveal to him the anti-capitalist—and anti-technological—potentials of conflicts, but keeps him in a state of waiting, hedonistically expecting that a catastrophe will resettle a disillusioned humanity in the aboriginal jungle and put rational thought back on the road of instinct, magic and voodoo.

Not at all being inclined to amuse ourselves in the search for the causes of oppression in the emergence of symbolic language or the domestication of the horse, we must instead concentrate on the most proximate causes: the logic of profit and productivity, material interest as the motivating principle of society, the market as its regulatory mechanism, instrumental reason; we are referring to the capitalist system, and specifically to its phase of globalization. There are, of course, more distant causes, prior to capitalism: the division of labor, the state, the Megamachine, hierarchies, religion, property, classes, war.... The anti-developmental critique, the historical heir of the thought that emerged from the class struggle, must not ignore these causes, or else it would only serve the reproduction of oppression under other forms, but it knows that these causes have attained their maximum level under capitalism, and that they are currently shaped by the capitalist chisel. This even applies to religious faith, which now takes the form of the fetishism of techno-science. Capitalism is the master of the world and therefore every real struggle is and will continue to be an anti-capitalist struggle. The short-term objectives that must be established, as partial as they might be, cannot be satisfied in capitalism. To make production decline to the level of twenty years ago, to reduce the consumption of meat and dairy products, to put an end to the factory farming of domestic animals, to drastically limit the use of fossil fuels, to prohibit the private vehicle, to freeze the accounts of the real estate developers and construction companies, to reconstruct the polluted territories covered in concrete and asphalt, to restore the commons, to restore the urban gardens, to municipalize, de-urbanize, dismantle energy industries and power plants, recycle, use local products, re-use things.... These are the practical measures that can help construct a minimum anti-developmental program. The defenders of technological progress will call it extravagant, but the ultra-developmental plans that the greed of their promoters never ceases to bestow upon us are even more extravagant.

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