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Revolution and Primitivism

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“Why is it that, in our eyes/Any past time/Seems better?”

We live in hard times, in which the past is incommunicable. The survivors from the older generations are incapable of passing on the experience of their defeats and their victories to young rebels because the latter are living in such different conditions of existence that the old truths no longer apply. The older generation has no descendants, and today’s generation has no ancestors. Capitalism and industrial civilization have created an artificial environment where people without memories undergo changes at a dizzying speed. These changes take place so fast that they leave the very notion of change behind; the idea of time is therefore also lost. Every fifteen or twenty years one has to start all over again from scratch. The dead were buried long before the new generation could succumb to the temptation of venerating their memory. The revolution does not take its poetry from the past, but it cannot draw its poetry from the future, either. We are installed in a perpetual present, in which the old defeated projects of emancipation and

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the preposterous ideologies born from their failure walk the same road.

At the very same moment in history when the industrial city was born, so also was the desire to flee from it. The modern sentimentality concerning nature was born along with air pollution and the accumulation of hazardous wastes. The emotion is legitimate, but by being transformed into nostalgia it was to become one of the faces of progress. As a reaction against the harm wrought by industry it sensitizes people; but this is not enough. What is needed is for sentiment to become consciousness and consciousness to become a practical force. Recourse must be had to reflection and historical analysis, that is, one must turn to theory in order to generalize it as revolt. One has to grow up, leave childhood behind and accept the fact that we are social and rational beings. Industrial civilization must be opposed with rigorous thought and a strong organization that allows that thought to become practice in the struggle against this civilization. There must be revolutionary action, as the social revolution will be ecological or, as they say now, primitivist, or it will not take place at all.

When speaking of primitivism one should distinguish between those who want to understand archaic societies in order to acquire conceptual weapons for confronting and transforming the world, and those who seek innocence and beatitude, lost in the passage of time, in primitive lifestyles. The former do not intend to recreate these social formations, however much they may be inspired by them; the latter assert in all seriousness that the road to freedom for humanity passes through the return to prehistoric stages. Therefore, in this view, the mere abolition of the State, capital and industrial production amounts to nothing unless it results in our return to the forest. In the one case, an attempt is made to develop social critique and to show that other ways of life are possible; in the other, it is a matter of a self-satisfied ideology which masks social conflict and impedes the developing consciousness of the

accommodated and acknowledged, to become themselves. So, how does one make history? As someone said, at first gradually, then all at once.

primitivists provide nature with contents, they spiritualize it and convert it into the home of freedom and harmony. They project representations of the private life of the middle classes, the heirs of the bourgeois ideal, into nature. They seek this cozy heaven through the ideologization of the wilderness. They preach personal salvation at the expense of civilization—of society—rather than in the struggle against oppression. They renounce the social experience of freedom, because for them civilization, all of society, is a form of life that is alien to the natural order. The opposition of nature and society presupposes the complete ruin of the civilized world; thus, for the vulgar primitivist, one must rebuild nature rather than make the revolution; not even the primitivist revolution. He does not want to leave adolescence and take a leap forward in history; he wants, as a matter of speculation, of course, to return to the ice age. Everyone knows: in the darkness of time all cats were grey.

The vulgar primitivist flees from history as well as from action. He does not consider the past and the present as guides for living. The cult of nature or the idealization of archaic communities obeys the desire to avoid the dangers of history (the dangers of action) because, above all, the vulgar primitivist does not take risks. Deep down, he knows that he is committed to nothing because a return to nature is not possible; there is no longer a virgin nature to which one can return. A nature which is prior to history does not exist, not even for primitive peoples; it all revolves around the economy. As Bernard Charbonneau said, “nature is the public garden of the totality”. Nature has already been urbanized and suburbanized. Strategic thought and social action are necessary for the liberation of nature as well as for the liberation of individuals; in short, revolutions are necessary which will lead us to a civilization free of the commodity and industry. The revolution is the only way to impart consciousness to history and history is the specifically human model of existence, the environment where individuals can be

exploited. There are thus two completely different forms of primitivism: a subversive one, which wants to clarify the new problems posed by the social struggle and to drive the revolution forward; and one which is conformist and reactionary, and muddles these problems and sows confusion, a form of primitivism that is based on instinct and rejects method, and that makes itself comfortable in those spaces that industrial society allows it to occupy. The one is proof of health, the other, of spiritual sickness. It is the latter fever of consciousness we shall now address.

An ideology so demented and unreal, one that belongs on the same shelf with other liberal extravagances, should not be of much importance, since its practice does not extend beyond mere day tripping and is about as adventurous as the Marseilles Soap Factory, yet to the degree that it informs an irrationalist discourse that plunges headlong into bourgeoisification or delirium, it is of some significance. It turns nature into a weapon to be used against thought. Vulgar and philistine primitivism demands the abolition of all culture—of all civilization—and of all social organization, especially that of the cities, the cradle of freedom and the site of the most extreme forms of class struggle. Thought and art, literature and the liberal professions, testimonies to human creativity and genius, genuine manifestations of man’s freedom, are in its view utterly dispensable. The role of science or the printing press in the struggle against religion and monarchy is deprecated, just like every other historical fact. Vulgar primitivism not only rejects scientific knowledge or liberating inventions, it rejects every other form of knowledge and transmission of knowledge that approaches the historical horizon. There is nothing to learn or to teach from the history of civilizations beyond the recipe for making falafels. In short, the primitivist philistine does not demand freedom, but ignorance, i.e., barbarism.

If we view society through such a lens, all of its historical moments are reduced to one: all civilizations are territories of

domestication and the lack of freedom. This is a radically anti-historical and feverishly individualistic ideology. For this ideology, every form of organization is a source of authority, all mass movements aspire to construct a center of power and all revolutions murder freedom. One must not, in that case, organize, or promote mass actions, or pursue revolutionary goals. Vulgar primitivism is a moralistic ideology which as such does not get involved in action, and cannot endure a confrontation with reality. It is immobilist. Under the optics of such a renunciation of the social struggle, the revolution is just another error; the vulgar primitivist opposes insurrection to the social revolution, but not a popular insurrection, an extension of the revolution, but rather a strictly moral and individual rebellion. For the vulgar primitivist, freedom is not something that is realized in society, via institutions. So there is no social question, only a personal question. There is no battlefield to join, but a cloak in which one can hide. The society of radical primitivism must not be contaminated, a wall of primitivist absurdities must be raised and one must take refuge behind it.

The reactionary character of vulgar primitivism is revealed by its position on the workers movement. With one stroke it liquidates the role of the proletariat in history, of revolution and of anarchism itself, which, let us not forget, is an idea of freedom and emancipation born in the furnace of class struggle. In its view, the history of the class struggle is merely the history of the struggle for power. The proletariat only aspires to the seizure of power, like the bourgeoisie; there are no differences between the various tendencies in the workers movement since they all want the same thing. Vulgar primitivism consequently disdains the workers struggle against exploitation and for freedom. For the vulgar primitivist this struggle generates new forms of authority, and class goals and methods are therefore rejected. Direct action, the general strike and assemblies are condemned along with the unitary trade unions and the workers councils. The old emancipatory goal, the free

association of the producers—the idea that the emancipation of the workers must be achieved by the workers themselves—is an authoritarian and domesticating fallacy from this perspective. The vulgar primitivist is against work—as is the whole world—and is, furthermore, against the worker; the fact that billions of workers live in this world who cannot make their living from pleasurable activities like hunting and fishing, does not seem to impel him to reveal his plans for a return to the primitive lifestyle. He does not bother to explain the real possibilities of his ramblings because, as we have pointed out above, he does not immerse himself in the river of action. He limits himself to advocating, as a distant goal, an anomic social state which could give rise to ephemeral associations based upon temporary agreements. Once again, barbarism, but this time bourgeois barbarism. The primitivized ideal of a second home with a garden and some neighbors.

The vulgar primitivist does not want to destroy the social order, or to force a radical change in society, or to abruptly dissolve the existing living conditions, since that would definitely constitute the revolution. To revolutionary social practice, he opposes an apparent and fictitious existential project, purged of all social criteria. He eliminates everything that is socially concrete from practice, everything historical and social. His homilies on freedom leave him committed to nothing, but confer upon him a rebellious aura which gives him comfort and reassurance. All of them feel like Papuans, although they are 20,000 kilometers from New Guinea. Their paeans to absolute freedom are exclusively directed against the practices which make it possible. Once again we recognize the transgressive but simultaneously immobilist attitude of the decadent bourgeoisie, typical of those times when the ruling class must subvert its own values in order to preserve them.

The dehumanization of society has led to the idealization of nature. Just like the Enlightenment bourgeoisie of the 18th century and the romantic writers after them, the vulgar