Stanley Diamond
The Uses of the Primitive
1960

Retrieved on 5th November 2018 from
http://www.primitivism.com/uses-primitive.htm
This is a chapter excerpt from Stanley Diamond's *In Search of the Primitive*.

**usa.anarchistlibraries.net**

# The Uses of the Primitive

Stanley Diamond

1960

The concept of the primitive is as old as civilization because civilized men have always and everywhere been compelled by the conditions of their existence to try to understand their roots and human possibilities. But the converse does not hold. Primitive societies, so far as I know, have not generated any systematic notion or idea, certainly not any vision, of civilization. This I believe to be an odd and revealing circumstance. How are we to explain it? May we say that primitive people have no conception of progress or development nor any sense of history and thus no basis for projecting an image of civilization? I think not. In the first place, primitive peoples have strong canons and perceptions of personal growth. The concrete *idea* of personal development saturates primitive society. Second, primitive cosmologies are often developmental in the broadest, metaphorical sense. Primitives do not lack a general capacity to conceptualize development or change in form over time; their perceptions are not static. Nor do they ignore simple chronologies; the memories of primitive people are, in the absence of writing, unusually efficient. But history to them is the recital of sacred meanings within a cyclic as opposed to a lineal perception of time. The merely pragmatic event, uninvolved with the sacred

cycle, falls outside history, because it is of no importance in maintaining or revitalizing the traditional forms of society. So it is true, I believe, to state that primitives have no *secular* sense of history and no lineal *idea* and hence no prophetic *ideal* of social progress. Moreover, progress as an abstraction has no meaning for them.

Obviously, this is not the result of a lack of imagination but of a lack of need. Primitive myths, folk tales, legends, oral traditions generally, abound in the most vivid and trenchant symbolic comments on the human condition, but their content, in no case of which I am aware, foreshadows that level of social structure and quality of cultural being which we call civilization. The civilized human condition is *inconceivable* to primitive peoples. It is not even imagined as a mythological alternative, since civilized behavior is so critically different in actuality from primitive behavior — as different as the differences between the sexes. Nor is this the result of a lack of contact between any given primitive people and civilization. For example, no American Indian tribe, moving on the expanding margins of civilization, fighting for the room to breathe, proved willing or eager to "civilize" itself after the model of the Europeans.

In fact, acculturation has always been a matter of conquest. Either civilization directly shatters a primitive culture that happens to stand in its historical right of way; or a primitive social economy, in the grip of a civilized market, becomes so attenuated and weakened that it can no longer contain the traditional culture. In both cases, refugees from the foundering groups may adopt the standards of the more potent society in order to survive as individuals. But these are conscripts of civilization, not volunteers. Thus, the idea of civilization is among primitives determined after the fact of contact; and then the conceptions seem negative, fragmented, uncommitted to any grandiose notion of civilization as such. They are often uncomfortable caricatures of our cheapest desires. Pertinently, among the more significant political leaders of the emerging ex-Colonial states in areas where primitive cultural character-

istics still remotely exist, one gets no sense of any deracinated and secular belief in progress. Rather, there is always the conception of a *return* to the communal ethos and disciplined expressiveness, of the primitive community, achieved through a new technology and more broadly based social forms. As we shall see, this was a typical Enlightenment attitude. Strangely enough, as the last phase of the French Revolution reaches Africa, the leadership looks to the spirit of the past of its own people, to those "savage tribes" that caught the fancy of certain *philosophes* and which they used to exemplify certain truths, as a guide and catchword for the future. If Old Europe and the New World are to survive their own hardening civilization, it may be to those "savage tribes" now emerging that we must look. Torn by the Western world, still free of most of our vested interests and archaic capital equipment, more disordered but not so civilized and sick as we are, they may, were they to control their resources and technics, yet prove the case for the Enlightenment, which is also our case. That, at any rate, is what their best leaders, speaking in the idiom of our eighteenth-century forefathers, imply. But their polities are no longer primitive; they trade on memories and on the inherited richness of the apolitical human associations in the localities. No primitive society has gone to civilization as to a greater good — in the emerging areas it is simply a question of using whatever primitive resources remain.

The fact (startling as it may seem to a civilized mentality) is that the majority of men for the greater portion of human history and prehistory have found primitive societies economically, socially and spiritually (or, as we would say, ideologically) *viable.* The absence of revolutions and reform movements; the nativistic opposition that arises when primitive cultures are under assault, with doctrines that turn the unacculturated state into an Eden and chiefs into prophets, preaching that civilization is but the wrath of God which may be exorcised by penance and right living, the spontaneous, marked distaste (despite the selective borrowing of potent instruments) when the primitive culture retains a base from which

to view civilization, and the absence of any alternative mode of life as a systematic element in primitive oral tradition — these are all symptomatic of the human adequacy of primitive institutions. The passionate notion of death and rebirth through ritual; the linking of the deceased to the living and the unborn; the projected kinship of the society with nature and the person with society, in creative correlation with traditional subsistence techniques; all these set primitive perceptions against the idea of progress. Even when a relatively integrated and defiant primitive society borrows from civilization a superior tool for a specific purpose, the effort is made to incorporate the new element into the preexistent structure of belief and action. It is not imagined that the tool may have other consequences. How often primitive persons have lost their way in civilization because they could not anticipate the responses expected of them in a novel environment! How often they have misconstrued intention, misread sign or symbol, or looked for brothers where only strangers lived! To mistake the city for a compound, the European for an elder or a peer, or money in the hand for the capacity to live alone — such little soul-destroying errors need only be committed once.

The cyclic sense of time in accord with natural and human rhythms and the absence of the idea of progress and of any vision of civilization are, of course, related phenomena; they are further correlated with the nature of primitive as opposed to civilized technology. When we examine archaic civilizations (Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, China, Rome) or contemporary commercial-industrial civilizations, we find that the life pace set by the demands of the market, the civil authority or the machine increasingly displace human and natural rhythms. In both slave and machine-based societies, the expressive, musical movements of the primitive, communal work group have been abandoned. The primitive work group is traditional and multifunctional; labor is, of course, utilitarian but it is also sacred — a sport, a dance, a celebration, a thing in itself. In civilization, group labor becomes a compulsive



to create a vision of a more viable future, even in such cases the author finds himself rediscovering the flaw in the monolith — human nature — and the necessity of a more existential realization through a more primitive expression.

Contemporary civilization everywhere tends toward collectivization, whether upon a “public” or “private” basis; it is not the devil of any particular system. Thus, contemporary states forge or ignore history; create political myths which propagate the official version of human nature and an inevitable past that wholly justifies the present. The capacity to create primitive myths that explore the ambivalence of man, and the incessant struggle for a common human identity simply withers like an unused human muscle.

Even the most brilliant and fearful utopian projections have been compelled to solve the problem of the human response, usually with some direct or allegorical reference to a prior or primitive level of functioning. In Zamiatin's *We,* a satirical work of great beauty, the collective society of the future is based on, and has become a maleficent version of, Plato's *Republic.* The people have been reduced to abstract ciphers, their emotions have been controlled and centralized (as in the Republic, mathematics is the most sublime language; but it is not a means of human communication, only an abstract dialogue with God); and history has ceased to exist. Zamiatin documents the growth of the internal rebel who is gradually educated in the experience of what the regime defines as love. When the revolt against this state of happiness occurs, the civil power uses two ultimate weapons: one is a method of instantaneously disintegrating the enemy. Since the enemy is legion, the other method is the "salvation" of the person, as an eternal civil servant, through a quick, efficient operation on the brain that results in a permanent dissociation of intellect and emotion without impairing technical intelligence. Zamiatin's description of the rebel rendered affectless, lucidly describing the changes on his beloved coconspirator's face and feeling nothing as she dies, anticipates Gamus and transmits in its terrifying, poignant flatness a psychological truth about our time that has become a dreadful cliche'. Zamiatin informs us that such a materialist, secularized and impersonal utopia can function only by altering human nature itself. And, outside the glass wall of his utopian city which had arisen out of the ruin of the "final" war between the country and the city is a green wilderness in which primitive rebels live off the land, alive to their humanity, and seek to free the ultimately urbanized brother within.

The point is (and it applies equally to the lesser works of Huxley, Orwell, and others) that where the utopian projection is conceived as a nightmare, as a mere extension of the shape of contemporary industrial society, and where the intent is to protest rather than



means. In an archaic society, slaves may work under overseers in large, uniform groups, constructing public utilities by brute labor; or they may work under extreme pressure, using rationalized, mechanical motions to produce as many agricultural or commercial products as possible within a given period of time, in order to maximize profit to masters.

In machine-based societies, the machine has incorporated the demands of the civil power or of the market, and the whole life of society, of all classes and grades, must adjust to its rhythms. Time becomes lineal, secularized, "precious"; it is reduced to an extension in space that must be filled up, and sacred time disappears. The secretary must adjust to the speed of her electric typewriter; the stenographer to the stenotype machine; the factory worker to the line or lathe; the executive to the schedule of the train or plane and the practically instantaneous transmission of the telephone; the chauffeur to the superhighways; the reader to the endless stream of printed matter from high-speed presses; even the schoolboy to the precise periodization of his day and to the watch on his wrist; the person "at leisure" to a mechanized domestic environment and the flow of efficiently scheduled entertainment. The machines seem to run us, crystallizing in their mechanical or electronic pulses the means of our desires. The collapse of time to an extension in space, calibrated by machines, has bowdlerized our natural and human rhythms and helped dissociate us from ourselves. Even now, we hardly love the earth or see with eyes or listen any longer with our ears, and we scarcely feel our hearts beat before they break in protest. Even now, so faithful and exact are the machines as servants that they seem an alien force, persuading us at every turn to fulfill our intentions which we have built into them and which they represent — in much the same way that the perfect body servant routinizes and, finally, trivializes his master.

Of such things, actual or possible, primitive societies have no conception. Such things are literally beyond their wildest dreams, beyond their idea of alienation from village or family or the earth

itself, beyond their conception of death, which does not estrange them from society or nature but completes the arc of life. There is only one rough analogy. The fear of excommunication from the kinship unit, from the personal nexus that joins man, society and nature in an endless round of growth (in short, the sense of being isolated and depersonalized and, therefore, at the mercy of demonic forces — a fear widespread among primitive peoples) may be taken as an indication of how they would react to the technically alienating processes of civilization if they were to understand them. That is, by comprehending the attitude of primitive people about excommunication from the web of social and natural kinship we can, by analogy, understand their repugnance and fear of civilization.

Primitive society may be regarded as a system in equilibrium, spinning kaleidoscopically on its axis but at a relatively fixed point. Civilization may be regarded as a system in internal disequilibrium; technology or ideology or social organization are always out of joint with each other — that is what propels the system along a given track. Our sense of movement, of *incompleteness,* contributes to the idea of progress. Hence, the idea of progress is generic to civilization. And our idea of primitive society as existing in a state of dynamic equilibrium and as expressive of human and natural rhythms is a logical projection of civilized societies and is in opposition to civilization's actual state. But it also coincides with the real historical condition of primitive societies. The longing for a primitive mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is a precondition for our survival. Even the skeptical and civilized Samuel Johnson, who derided Boswell for his intellectual affair with Rousseau, had written:

> When man began to desire private property then entered violence, and fraud, and theft, and rapine. Soon after, pride and envy broke out in the world and brought with them a new standard of wealth, for men, who till then, thought themselves rich, when they wanted nothing, now rated their demands, not by the calls of nature, but by the plenty of others; and began to consider themselves poor, when they beheld their own possessions exceeded by those of their neighbors.

This may be inadequate ethnology, but it was the *cri de coeur* of a civilized man for a surcease from mere consumption and acquisitiveness, and so interpreted, it assumes something about primitive societies that is true, namely, predatory property, production for profit does not exist among them.

The search for the primitive is, then, as old as civilization. It is the search for the utopia of the past, projected into the future, with civilization being the middle term. It is birth, death, and transcendent rebirth, the passion called Christian, the trial of Job, the oedipal transition, the triadic metaphor of human growth, felt also in the vaster pulse of history. And this search for the primitive is inseparable from the vision of civilization. No prophet or philosopher of any consequence has spelled out the imperatives of his version of a superior civilization without assuming certain constants in human nature and elements of a primitive condition, without, in short, engaging in the anthropological enterprise. A utopia detached from these twin pillars — a sense of human nature and a sense of the precivilized past — becomes a nightmare. For humanity must then be conceived to be infinitely adaptable and thus incapable of historic understanding or self-amendment. Even Plato's utopia presumes, at least, a good if no longer viable prior state, erroneously conceived as primitive by the refined Greek when it was merely rustic; and the *Republic* was, after all, founded on a theory of human nature that was certainly wrong. Nevertheless, it was a saving grace, for Plato believed that his perfectly civilized society would realize human possibilities not merely manipulate them.