

A Quick and Dirty Critique of Primitivist & Anti-Civ Thought

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Contents

Introduction	3
Technology	4
Rigidity	5
Complexity	6
Means	10
Civilization	11
Our Core Desires	14
Civilizational Collapse	17
Ecological Collapse	21
Conclusion	23

Introduction

When I was six-years-old my anarchist dad smuggled me a copy of Jurassic Park against my mom's prohibitions. "When you can read it, you can read it," he said, and within a year I had not only learned every last word, I'd read my fraying copy cover to cover dozens of times in the boring waits at homeless shelters, soup kitchens and welfare offices. Surrounded by a filthy concrete dystopia I read again and again with wide eyes as the Cassandra character inveighed against rigid systems of control as prone to diminishing returns and inevitable catastrophe, spoke about how hunter gatherers worked far less and played far more. I was hooked. Between survivalist day camps and Zerzan tracts at the used bookstore primitivism gave me wonderful ammunition against the myriad tyrannies that littered my existence, from elementary school to the hustles of poverty. These too shall fall, I contented myself. I played in the tiny forest behind the projects we came to live in and loathed the corruption that crept in. I pulled up concrete and broke car windows with my friends.

But mostly I continued to read.

And gradually, slowly, I started to recognize other dynamics at play, other possibilities, and more solid or rooted critiques of power. The claims of John and company started to sour. I realized they were less and less substantiated, clear-cut or sweeping. And, as the points I still agreed with were made in ever more disingenuous or opportunistic rhetoric, I felt betrayed. I began consciously parting ways with primitivism while fighting in the streets of Seattle in '99. I'd grown too audacious to settle for the limited values, blueprints & strategies of primitivism, and it was clear there was no going back.

The same insatiable love for the natural universe that prompted me to fall in love with the forests of Cascadia ended up taking me to theoretical physics. And when I look back at primitivism what I see now seems ever more cold and unrecognizable. Bros chortling about and encouraging the death of billions. Open anti-intellectualism and unbelievably shoddy arguments. Awkward ethical frameworks as well as misunderstandings of anthropological and archaeological records. There are exceptions to be sure — the occasional intellectually vigilant, analytic and sincere individual burnt out and hedging her bets. But Primitivism as a whole? I don't see the arrival of authoritarian pseudo-Maoist cults, John retreating to openly embrace "spiritualism", and murderous idiots who think lobbing the term "modernism" is a meaningful argument, are disconnected from the underlying rot.

I wrote on this subject a decade ago¹, but my approaches were directed at the theoretical formulations of primitivism I found most substantive at the time. For whatever reason — and perhaps for the worse — those currents have since mostly died out. Today the landscape is even more ideologically fractured and many have retreated to a nebulous "anti-civ" position that inherits most of the primitivist framework while remaining loose enough to duck most criticism. But while those identify as anti-civ may individually break with some aspects of primitivism, without any of the frameworks or narratives of primitivism, there wouldn't be an anti-civ position to speak.

Core to the term "anti-civ" itself is a sweeping impression of "civilization" that is intensely problematic and lends itself to overly simplistic narratives. Primitivism is rife with this kind of irreductionist handwaving that dreams up big monsters from loose associations and gives them agency as magical forces acting on the macroscale, shaping every particular. Following an ap-

¹ 15 Post-Primitivist Theses

proach that Ellul openly termed “monism”, primitivism refuses to pick these spooks apart, to recognize any conflict between or latitude in the configuration of their constituent dynamics. Everything is seen as inextricably woven into a whole that acts according to a simple narrative. Such a conspiratorial mode of thought is basically just a doubling down on Marxism, replacing “capitalism” with *even broader and more abstract monsters* of “technology” and “civilization”. These tales are often explicitly anti-radical in their disdain for getting at the root components.

This reactionary tendency prompts the leveling of normative appeals in terms of broad macroscopic impressions or intuition pumps rather than concretely rooted ethical arguments. Primitivism isn’t an analysis so much as a story. And to function it thus requires a pruning away of complications, never searching beyond the frame or terms of the macroscopic narrative. It happily collects piles of supporting factoids, claims, and even concrete points. But since what matters most are the broad impressions, any specific critique one might level against a given claim is easily sidestepped by just switching to new claims. Tackling primitivism effectively first requires stepping up to the level of generality it operates in — critiquing classes, categories, or trends of arguments within primitivist discourse so as to leave no ground to retreat to, to box in any specific argument from all sides. Only then can we get down into the weeds about the possibilities and dynamics of endless particulars like coltan mining.

Technology

The mainstream definition of technology is basically “ways of doing stuff.” And so it’s inclusive of language, knowledge, equations, tactics, heuristics, tools, and even our bodies. Any conceivable *means* or avenue by which one might act or accomplish something.

Yet in common use “technology” has come to accumulate stronger associations with a subset of these means — ipods and bulldozers rather than ballet exercises or vocal chords. This “technology” is a weird bundle of things, more an *aesthetic* of physical objects than anything substantive. Is it grey? Does it have metal in it? Corners?

There are a lot of new means that have been developed since industrialization, but average people don’t tend to refer to whiteboards or yoga as “technologies”. Instead there is a very distinct narrative of progress that is widely sold to us by our rulers and it places shit like laptops and cars as the pinnacle of all technologies — to the point where every other means of doing things is implicitly derided. Similarly although “machine” can mean virtually anything with noticeable sub-dynamics that uses energy to do things, we don’t tend to refer to mallard ducks or squirt guns as “machines.” There’s an implicit teleology baked into the way we use these terms.

Primitivists frequently take this looser impression or narrative as their starting point rather than the broader if more concrete definition. And they’ve sought different definitions of technology alongside different analyses to try and better explain these associations. But I am not sure that there’s ultimately any real coherence or substance to the popular bias in our use. There is a sense that we “know technology when we see it” and yet this really does seem to appeal to nothing more than an aesthetic strand with a rather random lineage. The popular impression is arbitrary in various ways that are becoming increasingly inescapable and it does seem like we have no choice but to chuck that impression for the more precise and rooted — if broader — definition of *means* (something it’s impossible to sweepingly reject without rejecting all freedom to act).

While specific thinkers have built specific edifices of claims, in general they tend to take two distinct approaches in forging alternate definitions of “technology” that are narrower than “tools” or “means.” These two loci of alternative definitions are still quite influential to anti-civ thought, and examining them is highly illustrative.

Rigidity

The first of these approaches to defining “technology” is to appeal to the popular intuition in our era of a dichotomy between living things and non-living.

Some things are “alive”, other things are not. It’s a common rule of thumb and biologists at least for a while tried hard to make it a precise taxonomy. But the category of “living” is a notoriously problematic and probably meaningless intuition (are viruses alive? prions? how about stars? why shouldn’t we interpret crystals and rocks as living? where should boundaries be drawn between organisms? between them and their environment?).

On the other hand, unlike “alive”, there’s hope that our impression of “organic” can actually be saved. We can sometimes make a substantive distinction that holds between suppleness or fluidity and rigidity or brittleness. And certainly crassly-developed structures like highways and cars are insanely rigid and brittle. We’ve always had more organic technologies, but it’s certainly true that there’s been noteworthy pressures towards overly rigid technologies, particularly in the industrial era. Most of what is conjured by the term “industrial civilization” are huge infrastructural projects and operations with little to no adaptability. Modern capitalism depends on a lack of dynamic price signals and redistribution; large towering economic and political institutions rely on rigidity, the perpetual maintenance of certain conditions, so they don’t have to calculate and adjust to changing conditions whether ecological or human. And incredible sums of violence and human energy have been expended to maintain certain arbitrary conditions — demand, profit, etc. The rigidity of large infrastructural projects like the highway system, the diverse subsidies of fossil fuels, etc, underpin this social landscape. Rigidity is certainly characteristic of any system conducive to power relations, and the more rigid the more potentially brittle.

It’s easy to tie this to the simple and rock-like gears and mortar of early industrial factories. When we call something “cold and mechanical” the gist of what we’re saying is typically that it’s rigid and overly simple in structure rather than richly complex, engaged and adaptive.

Yet the overwhelming inclination today — even if it may be too late — is to make our tools more fluidly reconfigurable. General purpose computing has always been at root an attempt to escape the rigidities of single-configuration mechanisms. And now the great drive is to make the hardware of computers and other tools more fluid both in function and composition. So that we might construct or tear apart and rebuild them on the fly in our garage or local hackerspace in more decentralized and DIY ways.

Similarly the primitivist impulse to oppose biotechnology doesn’t ultimately square with a definition of technology as rigidity. While humans have always used biotech from cultivating plants long before agriculture to grafting trees, recent developments have given us a great deal more understanding and latitude in how to reconfigure biological systems, including things like anarchist biohackers getting yeast to produce critical cheese proteins without enslaving cows. While some multinational corporations may surely encourage their engineers and technologists

to approach biotech from a rigid perspective — clumsily stitching in random genes with as little knowledge or appreciation for much context beyond immediate trial and error — many clearly do not.

There's a deep problem here: More degrees of freedom in manipulation and reconfiguration — in *action* — is the definition of organic fluidity, and so in a very non-trivial sense our drive to better understand things and to have more means of doing things is ultimately a pressure towards more organic tools. Technological development — in the sense of inventions that expand our array of tools to choose from — can clearly be aligned in a positive direction. Indeed, when older or simpler technologies *aren't* stomped out by power structures and newer technologies *aren't* censored or filtered, any new invention adds to the array of possible means we have, and thus inherently expands the fluidity of our options.

Following this argument sincerely the conclusion would be that we need wider and more diverse ecosystems of tools, not less. Indeed one quickly comes to realize that the sin of the rigidities of our infrastructure and social systems are the way they suppress technological flourishing.

Complexity

However the second major primitivist approach to defining “technology” is on its face almost the exact opposite of the organic/inorganic dichotomy: In this lens what's focused on as the problem is the *complexity* of various tools and the infrastructures or social context they're embedded within.

An aside: I'm old enough to remember when the primary green anarchist critique of our technology was that it was too simple or boring and demanded too much rigid focus (that era saw all kinds of fucked up slogans like “only the machines don't have ADHD” or “civilization is making us autistic” that would never fly today). In the last decade of course the script has almost entirely flipped; now ‘technology’ is more frequently attacked as being inherently too engaging, too complex, and too unfocused. Instead of zoning out forever in front of the “boob-tube” we're now flitting back and forth between wikipedia and text messages on our phones. Certainly both attitudes represent a meaningful pushback against real tendencies in the tools and norms of their eras, but the leap to define technology “inherently” in such terms is a bit frustrating.

Nevertheless there is some substance to critiques of the complexity of the systems we use. Human brains are astonishingly complex and very plastic, but there are architectural limits to what we can process or keep in conscious attention, not to mention how quickly. We've all experienced bad, overly cluttered user interfaces on an app or even bad pedagogical presentations of a topic that require a ton of rewiring in our brains to process. Sometimes this can be like mental stretching — and it can be in different contexts a matter of healthy exercise, or just neutral or marginal. But sometimes to really understand or diligently engage with a system is beyond our present cognitive capacity — and sometimes it's even beyond beyond any feasible supercomputer. The cryptographic tools that have seen such dizzying success in fighting the NSA are only possible because of inescapable computational limits baked in to our universe by mathematics and physics. Create a sufficiently complex system and it will be beyond the capacity of any central authority or supercomputer to fully know much less control. In so many respects this is true of our present society.

A common refrain in anti-civ discourse is that large scale societies are unnatural and unworkable because we just can't know everyone the same way we could in small tribes. The relationships and interpersonal drama at play in a tribe of a hundred or so people may be complex, but when scaled up to thousands or millions or billions our puny brains can't even begin to make heads or tails of everything. And so, the story goes, we move through our lives disconnected and mentally frayed by the incalculable complexity of the society around us.

Now it's certainly true that we can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the staggering diversity of life and feedbacking cultural complexity unleashed by large societies, but there's an important difference to be highlighted between the invigorating complexity in a new genre of queer hip hop, versus the staggering complexity of a bureaucratic forms in a system denying us food stamps. Power and choice matters. When our lives are forcibly put on the line or when we're trying to make a difference but have no idea where to start, an overwhelming complex system can be alienating and terrifying, especially when violence is artificially simplifying away our option to not engage.

Yet *without* that pressure complexity becomes delightful and invigorating. Human beings have always held an attraction to complexity. Indeed much of the cross-cultural tendencies we consistently display in response to different visual media has to do with what complex dynamics we are able to discern in them — what organic interplay our brains discern in a forest versus a featureless rocky landscape. Occasionally this childlike hunger for complexity is beaten out of us and we adopt a staid sedentary undeath presented as “adulthood” or “maturity”. But time and time again we've strived for greater connection and community beyond the size of mere tribes. Even in places where the land would not permanently sustain it hunter-gatherers would voluntarily come together in the thousands for weeks or months on end, desperately striving to enjoy the benefits of mass society.

A frequently associated notion is that without deep personal knowledge of a person or ties to them we have no reason to care about them. This nihilistic take on ethics is most prominently championed by the terrorist group Individuals Tending Towards Savagery who've tried to murder students and anarchists in Mexico City; they explicitly reject and deride feeling compassion for people beyond one's immediate tribe. The obvious response, that empathy is generalizable and that we can in some very real sense feel compassion for the stranger who stumbles directly in front of us is, I think, rather trivially true and obvious to anyone who isn't a sociopath. Just as a toddler eventually comes to realize that other people exist, so too are we capable of growing better heuristics and growing more coherent in our intentions, developing not just the capacity to appreciate the existence of people we know through news reports rather than eyesight but to weigh and analyze our impact upon them. Similarly we have gotten extraordinarily good at quickly acclimating to strangers as well as situating them. Happenstance of birth location, language, family, etc are not — and shouldn't be — a determinant for affinity. It certainly doesn't reflect what relationships are most fecund for liberatory collaboration and development.

The complexity of our physical tools follows a similar arc. Complexity can be invigorating and it can be terrorizing — what matters are the power dynamics those complexities are embedded within. And there can be healthy ways of managing or navigating our interactions with incredibly complex systems without retreating from all interaction or attempting to artificially flatten them away. Indeed one of the major priorities of power has been to suppress complexity, to limit or prune down the ecology of possible tools to just a few options and impose them universally. To hide away the internals of our tools and external context behind a facade. It

should be telling that those realms anarchists have gravitated towards or have pioneered — like open source — have been distinguished by their embrace of complexity. Of course it's important to retain agency, to be able to select the tools of the appropriate complexity one needs or feels equipped to handle. *Where* we choose to invest our attention and thus cognitive or symbolic complexity is an important choice and many political or ethical arguments boil down to equally valid personal preferences, preferred realms of tinkering and play. But the complexity imbued within a tool — whether mesh wifi algorithms or prose or a hand-hewn bow — is in no remote sense innately negative.

It's important to note that the operative word really is “imbued.” While it can be possible to talk of complexity in concrete computational terms like Kolmogorov's formulation, ‘complexity’ can also matter in intensely subjective and relative terms that don't necessarily bear a direct relation to fundamental physical limits. Human beings assign symbolic or cognitive complexity in frequently haphazard, situational or anthropocentric ways. We think of our bodies as being “more complex” than coral reefs or gusts of wind, but it's not remotely clear that there's any greater computational complexity going on in the molecular dynamics that make us up. There's a danger of being closer to the subject and thus assigning more attention and conceptual signifiers to it.

Similarly our problem has often been not assigning *enough* complexity to our interactions with the world. Agriculture is filled with examples of humans constructing insufficiently complex or nuanced approaches. Even horticulture and hunting or foraging almost always involve drastically simplifying the ecological patterns to some structure or framework that's easy to deal with or model. We've often sought to reduce the complexity of the dynamics surrounding us to better keep track of and utilize them and sometimes this ends up being a really bad idea.

If anything the problem has long been that we've built tools that aren't *complex enough* to handle the complex environments or particulars they contend with.

“Complexity” is often bandied about like a single magical diagnostic for the collapse of historical civilizations, but again the problem becomes what “complexities” we see and name. Cultures can grow complex in insular ways, creating disconnected interpretive nets or languages that barely refer to anything. Additionally, power structures can attempt to awkwardly weld nuances and internal accounting methods into themselves in a desperate attempt to make up for their inadequacies without actually dissolving the core rigidities or imposed simplicities that gird and support their existence. All of that is real, yet the end of the day empires fall because they're not able to countenance or support the internal complexity necessary for more fluid engagement and adaptation. Indeed past a certain point of complexity empires would cease to be empires, dissolving away into more complex/organic modes.

Our technologies can develop in the direction of insularity — overextending themselves in twists of disconnected and unnecessary complexity — and at the same time they can also overextend themselves in overly simple ways that aren't responsive to the complex particulars of their environment and users. But additionally they can also integrate fluidly with these considerations. Although power itself often acts to artificially simplify for managerial purposes or to violently sever connections in ways that lead to cancerous insularity, this pressure is distinct and in no way inherent to technology itself. Tools are often embedded in a wider context, but they can also be distinct from that context. A hammer can be made many ways and can function even when the original hammer factory shuts. Many of the things primitivists love to take as ‘fundamental’ to the production of certain technologies are anything but.

Yes, infrastructural realities are incredibly important. The creation of the highway system, for example, has famously driven the normalization of the car form and a huge array of attendant tendencies. The sweeping violence of the state allows it to build artificial mass and scope and thus to impose forms or structures without much regard for their desirability or optimality. Solar steam engines were ready and highly viable two hundred years ago, but were abruptly sidelined permanently when the British Empire happened to conquer a large coal deposit along with a slave populace to mine it. Infrastructural forms feedback in a wide variety of ways with psychology, social norms, and power structures. This much is absolutely true. The community that builds a decentralized network of DIY radio towers stretching between villages to spread word about rapists or attempted marauders is going to have a resultant pressure towards a certain social configuration. Similarly the society that forces people off land to lower the price of oil will be able to use cheaper transportation to facilitate economies of scale, as well as imperial breadth and to suppress the diffusion of alternative technologies by lowering costs.

But it's vital that we distinguish between applied infrastructure and individual technologies. And between technologies in the standard sense of means or *knowledge of how to* and actual commodity products. These are distinctions primitivism gleefully wants to handwave away as all inseparable parts of a singular "megamachine", and blurred together they do make a simpler narrative, but distinguishing them can reveal a lot of critical points and tensions.

There is absolutely no doubt that the vast majority of things that characterize the global infrastructure at present are rotten and must be changed. But we must be diligent in our analysis of it, not merely appeal to the quickest way to present or phrase our resistance.

And the fact of the matter is the increasing complexity of our technology can be incredibly liberatory. Freedom doesn't lie in simplifying the world around us so that we never have to change ourselves to engage with it. So what if we don't understand the exact structure and function of every device we use? We typically don't understand the biochemical structures and functions of the plants we eat. It's certainly good to be able to understand such dynamics, but all human interaction with the world will inherently involve some pragmatic conceptual abstraction away from underlying complexities. A liberated world would surely be a richly lush and diverse world filled with endless complexities to explore, but not everyone will explore the same things.

The social and technological complexities before us might be new and as yet unsettled into some sort of long-term dynamic equilibrium, but such equilibria are few and far between; the earth's biosphere itself is always changing. The world described by 18th century biologists looking for a clockwork universe unchanged since set in motion by its creator is a lie — an attempt to make the constant churning of reality more palatable to a staid ruling class, self-domesticated within many walls of imposed simplicity. This kind of violent simplification of the physical world and of human desires and thoughts is necessary for power to act, to even exist. If it is to be taken down we must do more than wait for nature to erode it away, we must embrace the creative fountainheads of engaged fluid complexity within ourselves.

There remains great richness and complexity beyond the harsh walls of suburbia in the flows of our biosphere, and it has significant value, but far greater wildness lies ahead of us should we have the guts to embrace it. To plunge headlong into uncharted waters — developing new tools, new understandings, and new relations. Not insularly disconnected, but connected in a more rich and stunning array of ways.

If there are presently great forces allied against the deepening complexities of the internet era we should be unsurprised, but also undaunted. When presidents, politicians and chiefs of police

urge the dismantling of the internet, the repossession or forcible backdooring of every phone and device now grabbed by the masses it's clear they're being pressed up against the inescapable reality that complexity is anathema to power and control. But the explosion of culture, connection and code that has been unleashed in the last couple generations has incredible momentum. Our rulers may of course yet succeed in demolishing it, in banning general purpose computing as they want and expending great energy to twist the decentralizing tendencies back into a centralized panopticon, but their victory is hardly assured.

The interplay of our tools can grow complicated beyond any single person or political body's ability to control — just as is true with our relationships — but this can be a *good* thing. Anarchists should align ourselves with the uncontrollable.

Means

It must be admitted that a handful of primitivists have caught onto the contradictions attendant to dismissing technology in terms of rigidity and complexity. But some of their responses have been even more horrifying.

Embracing the mainstream definition of “technology” as any means of doing things, some primitivists have let their bile and the momentum of countless narratives run away with their sense and openly concluded in various manners that we should reject attempts to expand our avenues by which to act. Because doing things is itself wrong. Or because the act of trying to find more ways of doing things is wrong. Or because seeking to act outside a strict script is deplorable. Or because trying to exercise more ‘control’ over your tools or shaking fingers and thus have more options in life is the same as trying to ‘control’ other people by removing their options.

In these approaches agency itself is set up as the enemy of primitivism. This often comes with a strong embrace of an essentialistic “human nature”, or role that we are obliged to fill.

Conscious thought? Deliberation? Inquiry? Creative exploration of paths? These are taken as violations or perversions from our set path. Thinking, reflection itself, is taken as a corrupting tendency that must be rejected because it can lead bad places. In this frame of mind the only “real freedom” is to turn ourselves into limited and simple automatons — animals that never lift their heads to think beyond the immediate to engage with wider context or make informed choices. A kind of Orwellian *freedom from freedom*. This is often closely tied to anti-intellectual currents within the scene. In particular an intensely reactionary tendency that abandons and derides the intellect and diligent consideration as useless dead-ends. This current is obviously fascistic and closely mirrors the patterns in fascism's historical development. But its precise language of surrender is tailored to anarchist language.

“We've tried using technology and look at the mess we're in nonetheless” logically becomes “we've tried thinking about things and look at the mess we're in nonetheless.” Thinking is seen as hopeless and totally ineffective, a masturbatory waste of time that can only lead one down false paths. A rejection of technology is inevitable from this perspective. Not just smartphones but music, language, tactics, strategy, etc. The corruption of large parts of the primitivist scene to anti-civ nihilism has been the inevitable result.

Of course there are still many who don't fetishize the undearth of immediatism and don't entirely or openly embrace the obligation to follow some biological script. But they often still

inherit and invoke teleological notions in ways that add up to the same thing — personifying unthinking natural systems as having fundamental orientations or goals in themselves that must be respected. To alter a river’s course is violence against the sacred, and thus beavers are denying the “freedom” of the river. Since sacredness acts as a cognitive stop there’s no point in teasing apart the contradictions or arbitrary distinctions this sort of thinking engenders. A lot of hunter gatherer societies are animists, after all, and so it’s a short step for your local oogle to suddenly start talking in terms of the spirits of things and how anything he doesn’t like is “disrespectful” to fictitious entities in his head. How does one determine just what those spirits want? Well outside of rituals to promote an arbitrary consensus perspective through social pressures, there’s no answer. To appeal to science in anything less than shallow and opportunistic ways is to invoke yet another castigated demon.

I have little patience or hope for those ensnared in this worldview. They cannot be reached. And I illuminate this tendency merely as a precautionary *reductio ad absurdum* for those not yet pushed near its event horizon by a need to justify bad associations with “technology”. There is sadly no reaching those who deny and reject thought itself.

Civilization

“Okay,” say some of the anti-civ folks, “fine fine fine, we admit that technology is a thorny subject and maaaybe there’s a place for you nerds with your windmills and wifi routers in the ruins. But surely we can all agree that the entire edifice of our existing world is the product of a single horrific leviathan, a genocidal chain-reaction set off in prehistory with the mistake of agriculture and that is as unsustainable as it is totalitarian.”

There is a *degree* of truth to this tale.

The moment the last Ice Age ended the archaeological record we have sees a veritable explosion of population, agriculture and cities. As a consequence new, larger scale power structures became possible, characterized by more persistent relations. And through various means of conquest such organisms eventually grew to dominance and replicated around the world. But the story isn’t as clean-cut as the conventional Primitivist narrative. In particular, the claim that large numbers of people associating in one place (cities) inescapably equates oppression is tenuous at best.

We know a lot more now than Zerzan and Perlman did back in the 70s, and there wasn’t some 1:1 instantaneous relation between the advents of agriculture, cities and large scale social hierarchies in the archaeological record. There was agriculture in various senses without cities, cities without agriculture, cities and agriculture without hierarchy. At best there’s so far been a tendency towards certain associations, but the precise causality is blurry to say the least. Without access to the actual historical mechanisms it’s hard to claim there are no alternatives. Additionally there are relatively few truly distinct strands of empire in the historical record, so we don’t have fully separable case studies. And the scant handful of millennia since the ice age hasn’t presented more than a few iterations of these macroscopic organisms and their lifecycles — not enough time to draw any clear or solid rules about the phase space of possible configurations.

It’s true that with the surpluses and stores of agriculture you can sustain larger ruling classes and marauding hordes. The emergence of macroscopic power structures focused on permanent enslavement over larger and larger regions rather than occasional raiding — of *persistent* abuse

rather than intermittent — was connected with the emergence of persistent social contact and agriculture. But there were thousands and thousands of years in which the ties binding city, agriculture, and hierarchy hadn't been normalized. From findings in the Levant we know that plants were being systemically cultivated as far back as twenty thousand years ago. Much more history has been lost in the Amazon and Sub-Saharan Africa thanks to their modern climates; who is even to say what existed during the supposed hunter-gatherer period of the ice age. But the moment the ice caps started to retreat incredibly large populations came together in Britain to explore astronomy, contorting themselves to achieve the cultural complexities of large scale society even without agriculture. Great plains Native Americans would voluntarily come together in vast numbers, straining for the benefits of greater connectivity despite the limits of the land. Similarly the early pastoralist city of Catalhuyuk had a population orders of magnitude above Dunbar's Number and was notably egalitarian. Starkly egalitarian city societies without evidence of authority can be found throughout the archaeological record. From Cayonu's social revolution 9000 years ago that lasted two thousand years to the highly advanced Harrapans contemporaneous with the empires on the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates.

Until recently the historical record has been almost exclusively written by the most blood-thirsty conquerors and their perspectives are a terrible foundation for analysis. But even what record they left is clearly riddled with indications of exterminated resistant societies and maroons/pirate utopias.

The impulse to nevertheless write these missing chapters of our history out because they didn't "win" fundamentally mistakes what power and anarchy are. Just because one complex of power relations managed to plant its flags around the world doesn't mean the anarchistic currents it tried to digest in the process were in any sense vanquished. The presence of a flag or the locals now wearing western clothing doesn't in any sense equate the victory of empire.

We live in a more highly connected global society to be sure but there are deep contestations over the degree and nature of its structure. These contestations, these tensions, have grown incredibly complex as everyone on the planet has joined in pitched battle. There are a great many swirling strategic advances and defeats happening all around us.

The fact that we have increased our interconnectivity and cultural complexity — whether through strands carrying the coercive imprint of neoliberalism or on our own terms in the other direction in ways that resist power dynamics as with Somali communities hacking together cell-phone networks or Congolese villagers and nomads DIYing radio networks to collaborate to suppress marauders and rapists — does not equate surrender to an imperial logic.

The forces of power are quite showy today, but they are not always necessarily stronger or more repressive in effect. The radical milieu has a bad tendency to appeal to sweeping cynicism and desperation out of fear that anything less cartoonish than "everything is terrible and getting worse" won't be persuasive at rallying ourselves and others. The abolition of chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade? *A meaningless spectacle! Everyone knows wage labor in sweatshops etc around the world is so much worse! And the prison population is larger in real terms, even if radically smaller in percentage!* We end up aggressively, rabidly blind to improvements. As others have noted, this fetishization often leaves us befuddled and incapable of response when we start winning.

It's a bad idea to take the ostensible "reach" or "size" of an empire as a measure of its strength and oppression. The size of a patch of color on a map is no indication of its power. Just as often it is the case that "the mountains are high and the emperor is far away"; for all their spectacle

of might ‘larger’ empires are often more ephemeral. Indeed a world government could well be an improvement over the 200 or so interlockingly viciously competitive, redundant and locally-attentive nationstates we have today. Better to have distant and confused bureaucrats than the personal attention of small town cops. Regime or system collapses, when they come, are often reorganizations to be more efficient at protecting and deepening power relations themselves. Civil war between fractured fiefdoms has long been a great means to re-strengthen the game theoretic conditions used to justify power. The general computational efficiencies of decentralization can mean things like Rwanda’s genocide being more efficient than that of the Third Reich. When the Roman Empire fell the Vandals actually governed their sections of the old empire more effectively.

While the modern nationstate ecosystem is unparalleled in many horrific aspects, our highly connected mass society has also been incredibly conducive to anarchistic forces in culture and infrastructure. All the more potent for being explicitly conscious of their intentions and vigilant in pursuit of more anarchistic ends than mere egalitarianism.

Yes, technological advances have upped the stakes in the conflict between power and freedom. And “city culture” can be blamed insofar as it provides people the connections and depth of experience necessary to develop technologies. But the historical arc of “civilization” hardly represents a single beast but a complex battlefield of differing forces.

Viewing history in terms of the development of a singular “city-culture” that bundles in a dozen things is in so many ways a tale invented to clean things up in hindsight. It obscures the more salient degrees of freedom and tensions that existed in prior eras and wraps up a vast array of historical dynamics with a single relatively teleological bow.

If civilization is just any tendency for people to aggregate in large numbers it’s hard to assign any negative value to that. And disingenuous to claim that the macroscale power structures that dominate today are the inherent result of such.

The wild dishonesty of primitivist ideologues making pie-in-the-sky claims about hunter gatherer societies has already been widely noted. It’s no fun shooting fish in a barrel when they retreat to claiming magical sources of knowledge. But it must be said that if our hunger for much larger communities has brought into greater relief the old psychologies of dehumanization and selfishness that have spawned violence and power relations in nearly all human societies, so much the better. I prefer our enemies and idols be dragged into the daylight where they can be staked dead, rather than let perpetually rustle and lurk behind the interpersonal relationships of small communities from whom we have little alternative or escape.

Lastly it’s worth touching on the attempted definition or identification of civilization with the importing of resources. As if individual human beings and ecosystems don’t ‘import’ resources – what an arbitrary distinction! This notion of cities as black holes on the map that can only suck from an indentured peasantry is a contentless rhetorical appeal. What cities (or non geographically defined large aggregates of highly-connected people) produce is cognitive/cultural/technological complexity, which is why people consistently voluntarily trade and associate with cities when no tax or threat of force is present. Similarly the appeal to the scale of energy flows on a map is barely worth responding to. Not only is such a distinction intensely arbitrary, but that kind of footprint has been before and is being once again decoupled from the wider social connectivity represented by cities. Are primitivists really going to stop calling points of dense urbanity “cities” or “civilization” when they grow/collect all their food/energy on site in vertical

farms? Similarly an anarchy of highly networked but ecologically isolated hollowed out asteroids presses the superficial bundling of impressions that is “civilization”.

We can all agree that environmental devastation is generally negative. And yet it is precisely our push towards wider social connectivity — our globalized perspective — that has finally given us much deeper appreciations for the context of our actions. Hunter gatherers were blind to the externalities of their actions that didn’t result in relatively immediate environmental pressures. The mass networking, expanded knowledge and social options launched by cities offers a much better way.

Yes, this great messy experiment — this orgy of unleashed human thought and options in our relations — has raised the stakes and brought clarity to many perpetual struggles. But dense connectivity, having a multitude of options for collaboration and communication beyond a relatively static tribe, is not the same thing as the rigidity of empire.

We have always lied, withheld information, manipulated, positioned, threatened, and used physical force to constrain and direct each other’s options. Power relations followed us to the cities, but the history of our war with them is not a clean arc. We do not live in the belly of an all-encompassing beast. Rather our lives are found moment by moment on the edges of crossed swords. We are swirling in an intensely complicated and vast battlefield. The great connectivity of cosmopolitan urbanity is one of anarchy’s greatest victories. It has drawn our enemies like locusts. But to retreat, fall apart and scatter to the wind — to be run down and cornered alone once again by more attentive power relations in small tribes with fewer avenues of escape — is to abandon all hope or pretense of resistance.

Our Core Desires

The most frustrating thing about debate in terms like “civilization” and “technology” is that it confines our discourse to a very high level of macroscopic abstraction. And this naturally obscures deeper or more fundamental arguments over values and goals. I dislike this mode of theorizing immensely because it avoids a more direct or honest grappling between different perspectives on ethics and motivations, often to disingenuous effect.

For example when primitivists spew invective about “specialization” what they’re effectively targeting is *diversity*. All of us specialize, that’s the nature of individuality and subjectivity. Our experiences, our interests and knowledge bases inherently diverge insofar as we have any agency, any creativity, any inquiry, any latitude to roam. And it is through interacting that we benefit from others’ differences and uniquenesses. There will always be some things we can only accomplish in collaboration. So when primitivists sweepingly claim that it’s specialization that makes modern technology bad, they’re implicitly asserting that a certain type of “individuality” — self-sufficient autonomy — is better than another type of “individuality” — intellectual agency. That negative freedom is good and positive freedom bad. But all of these fundamental dynamics are hidden underneath heavily framed and leveraged examples. The full ramifications of such a sweeping allegiance to anti-specialization are hidden from first glance. That’s the nature of this kind of discourse.

The Problem with technology is that it “mediates” our interaction with reality, someone declares. But the air, photons, our skin, our cortical neurons, etc don’t? — It’s too late, this new rationalization for opposing technology has been grasped. And now that person finds themselves locked

into the logical ramification of their position. *What is mediation but chains of filters or processes? What is abstract thinking or pondering, but precisely this: interceding in the normal causal sequence of stimulation and reaction. Thinking is the problem! Doing due diligence rather than reacting immediately! Death to thinking! Death to the meta-abstraction inherent in consideration and judgement! What we want is lives lived in the absolute present! Fuck making plans! No considering anything in depth or at length! Ultimately the most important things you should value is “directness” and “immediacy”! Anything else is just disconnected fluff!*

By painting the barriers and inefficiencies we happen to grapple with in our particular context with a broad stroke (“mediation”) the primitivist undergoes a kind of ideological collapse until their ultradense framework allows no escape, no further cognitive motion or critique. Obviously, as psychological advice within a limited context, a greater degree of grounding or awareness of the present can be useful, but when people try to build full-fledged philosophies out of “living in the moment” the only result is death worship. A rock “lives in the moment” – the moment I prod it it moves. It is the mental recursion, the internal modeling, the exploration of possibilities before acting, the knowledge of broader context, that gives us agency.

There are quite significant normative statements being glossed over in different primitivist analyses. Sweeping claims and associations quickly grow into a dense thicket, both giving cover for and boxing people into absurd positions, all while the underlying roots are left unexamined.

What do we or *should* we most value or desire at core?

Primitivists are prone to trotting a litany of claims about the lives of hunter gatherers. *They were happier. They were super healthy Adonises. They had sex all the time. They even saw the moons of Saturn with their bare eyes.* It’s like a commercial for a new toothpaste. If they could find a way to claim primitivism will make people’s penises bigger I’m sure they’d try.

These claims can of course be disputed – in terms of how cherry-picked their examples are, how inherently specious anthropological accounts of ‘happiness’ are, how they cavalierly dismiss horrors like hunger, and to what degree primitive life’s success along these metrics can be superseded through other means – but I think this is the wrong approach. I don’t really care whether living as a primitive will give me a bigger cock. Why should we care about these superficialities? If mere happiness was the totality of our aspirations we could simply hook ourselves up in vats of heroin.

What do we value or desire at the root of our ethics/motivation? What do we desire *to desire*, or desire *to desire to desire*?

Even if happiness is something that we desire or should desire, is it ALL we want or should want? And if not happiness is there something else inherent to the being of anyone capable of examining and restructuring their desires – some kind of natural prescription that we might follow or revolt against to our doom? This is a harder question because it requires an identification, a settling on some particularly relevant definition of what we should identify with or what we should value.

Our brains have changed over the last two million years – even the last ten thousand – child-like traits like inquisitiveness emphasized and extended. A long arc towards fighting off the relative deadness and complacency of adulthood. Humans are at present a weird inseparable jumble of Pleistocene creature and radically new stuff; we are a number of contradictions physiologically with no underlying objective directive baked in.

Those who can conceive of nothing beyond a very superficial naturalistic fallacy might say that humans are defined by serving some niche role as gears in a broader machine/ecosystem.

But how do we go about determining what that role is from the vast variety of possible reads on it?

The ‘purpose’ of humanity might equally well be taken to be to serve as a cleansing virus – getting in a long-overdue mass extinction event so evolution can be sped up (there is after all no ecological imperative towards equilibrium). Or maybe the neotenic arc we’ve taken in retaining our childlike inquiry and creativity is an evolutionary catastrophe utterly at odds with the broader biosphere and we should all stop thinking, stop exercising our childlike inquiry, or even just kill each other off! Or maybe we’re the whole point of the sudden singularity of this Phanerozoic eon, a way for life to jump off this planet in a kind of ecological succession on the grandest scale, spinning up asteroids, seeding comets, rebuilding Mars from desolation, and turning the stars green.

Or maybe the relevant category isn’t what mere ecological niche we fill, but our existence as striving *minds*, dynamic neural networks modeling the world around them – as children struggling not to be vanquished by the sedentary, dying circuits of adults. Honestly I think this one rings the strongest. As inquiring, engaged, creative minds we don’t just ignore limitations, we’ve actively resisted and overcome them for as long as we have existed. Indeed creativity and inquiry seem in so many ways to lie at the core of liberty, of thinking, of existing. And for most of history the creatives, the scientists and the like have been situated in positions of resistance to power. Occasionally power structures learned how to eat them or incorporate them, but inevitably these methods fail and you get major politicians on tv demanding the effective abolition of science or the internet.

My point with these examples is we need to be clear about what sort of perspective or motivation we’re appealing to. And how that shakes out. It’s not enough to make broad references to “happiness” or “the earth”.

And yet – like Marxism – Primitivism largely ducks addressing our foundational ethics head-on; it avoids making any concrete arguments for why we should value the things it appeals to. The idea being that its target audience will probably have accumulated some loose positive associations with the things it invokes (green things feel good!) and so appealing to them should be good enough. But note that this is a decidedly non-radical approach.

And all the arguments in the world that technology or civilization may have certain downsides are *entirely beside the point* if those downsides are in different areas from one’s most core values.

My most core value is vigilance. I don’t see how one can speak of any sort of coherent ethics or care without it. In fact it was vigilance that attracted me to the arguments of primitivism two decades ago – concern with the lack of due diligence and consideration to the dynamics and externalities of our industrial society. But at the end of the day what primitivism ultimately represents is an *abandoning* of vigilance. The world of the permanent collapse is world in which our inquiry into the universe – the depth of our engagement with nature – can never progress past a certain level. A world in which the array of means (technologies) we might consider are permanently and starkly limited. In which we are cut off from the richness of most others’ thoughts and confined to tiny prisons of localism.

These deep tradeoffs to its prefigurative world are horrifying enough, but the primitivist ideology that has shaken out to defend that prescription bends inescapably towards a vicious anti-intellectualism.

Distilled, primitivism is the very opposite of radical thinking. In its reactionary embrace of an Orwellian negative freedom implicitly centered around a biological essentialism it has mu-

tated into a mockery of anarchism. The portrait of “freedom” as some unperturbed static natural state of being to be defended bears only the loosest of linguistic ties with the positive freedom – the *freedom to* – of anarchy. What the popular notion of collapse represented in Jensen’s “Endgame” – where almost all technological options are irrevocably banished – really presents is the ultimate prison. One so absolute as to need no further guards.

In this we must recognize primitivism as functionally serving to carry the tradition of domestication and sedentary life to its apex: a final desperate attempt to exterminate the rich Cambrian explosion of lush cultural and intellectual complexity that accompanied increased social connectivity and options in affinity. An extinction event unparalleled in the history of consciousness. The permanent loss of incalculable cultural and intellectual ecosystems.

And for what? A sedate lifestyle of immediatism, of comfortably consistent conditions. Longer chains, bigger cages. Superficial ameliorations at the cost of all further advances in freedom in the longterm. There’s a word for people who trade away all hope of the infinite in return for immediate pleasures, the very people who popularized “in the long term we’re all dead”... they’re called liberals.

Yes, freedom implies risk and danger. But the perpetual security promised by primitivism is a nightmare irreconcilable with anything capable of calling itself anarchist without choking. Coffins are made “human sized,” our lives should be lived bigger than that.

Civilizational Collapse

It must be said that I nevertheless occasionally happen upon the most relatable of primitivists. The sort of person persuaded not by mysticism or a deathlike hostility to complexity or thought itself but mostly by pragmatism and despair. Whose embrace of primitivism or anti-civ reflects not an anti-intellectualism, but a sincere analysis that sees no alternative.

“I hate thinking about it,” yet another burnt-out punk confides to me over bourbon. “Every time I glance around at the world all I see is death.”

And surely, yes, rampant ecocide continues largely unabated. But simple narratives have a kind of overwhelming pull. It becomes easy to pattern-match everything within their framework. The same triggered mental circuits, again and again and again. Eventually we get so lost deep in these well-worn ruts they feel like a vise. They become so painful – the feeling of being trapped so deep – that we develop an aversion to vigilantly pushing through. To collecting more data, considering alternate pictures or hypotheses. The moment something starts to remind us of the imprisoning narrative we wince away from it, implicitly accepting it rather than critically engaging with it.

But here’s the plain fact of the matter: We’ve explored very little.

Human history so far has been unimaginably brief when viewed on the scales of different social evolutionary cycles. It has also been in some ways a *single* history. This obliges both a certain amount of hesitancy when it comes to inferring anything and a certain amount of diligence. We are not able to set up a few hundred completely separate Earths and re-run the end of the ice age and the advent of large scale societies. We have only one Earth. This makes it all the more imperative we get things right, that we take the best possible path. And part of that means doing all our homework. Not falling back on easy defaults or simple stories like primitivism trades in, but proactively considering as many possibilities as we can.

Who knows what random parameters would spin out differently were we to clone a hundred prehistoric Earths. What teleologies or “deterministic” accounts of history would crumble away, revealed as so much just-so storytelling after the fact. It seems likely much would.

Whatever may get printed on Boeing pamphlets there isn’t some objective and singular path of technological “progress.” History is filled with chance occurrences and random walks down the available avenues. While in the broadest terms we can speak of a tendency for technological creativity to create more available means and there are some sequential dependencies to what technologies get invented, there are usually many many paths. And the social-infrastructural progressions that happened to play out — like tapping fossil fuels like crazy — are not inherent tradeoffs. I referenced Augustin Mouchot’s solar steam engine earlier, and its eclipse by both a decrease in coal prices thanks to British imperial conquest and a French-British treaty. Suffice to say that had an anarchist revolution succeeded back then, or even had the vagaries of geopolitics spun out differently we would have taken a different path. There are countless examples of such happenstance throughout the histories of technological development. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse.

One can easily spin out alternate paths we might have taken to get from the ice age to information technologies had we developed and stuck to an anarchist ethos back in prehistory:

People collaborate into large cities, horticulture and pastoralism provide the foundation, then aqueducts and plumbing technology — as the egalitarian and peaceful Harrappans were immediately inclined towards — lead to city gardens and more sustainable irrigation. Sanitary city conditions lead to plummeting child mortality which (as we’ve seen around the world) rapidly leads to stable populations and dramatically differing concepts of relations towards children which helps prevent hierarchical abuse feedback loops ingraining slaver mindsets. The lack of rapid population imbalances and consequent warring leads to longer time preferences and less pressure to grow food at any cost, which leads to saner controlled experimentation surrounding crop practices. Metallurgy is developed in a competitive and egalitarian environment of more DIY backyard shop styles that never provides the startup coercion necessary to concentrate knowledge. Written language emerges from the mathematics of studying astronomy, weather, engineering, exploration, and keeping accounts in a world where tribal reputation mechanisms have trouble scaling past Dunbar. We get glassmaking and lenscrafting very early which leads to solar and all of modern physics. As well as the dramatic advancements in mathematics to go with it, and ancillary insights in biology and chemistry. Glassmaking — the mere artisanal heating of sand — is so profoundly important to the leaps of the last few hundred years I could geek out on it for an entire piece at least as long as this one. But suffice to say a more deliberative and scientific world has less pressure and capacity to extract and burn fossil fuels before realizing their impact. In such a world without governments murdering scientists, closing off research and making proclamations like “we do not do jewish physics”, fundamental research would move a hell of a lot faster, while the absence of huge command economies and capital accumulations mean industry and large scale infrastructure would move slower.

We may not have a direct window to that particular alternate universe, but we don’t have a window to *any* other universes. And it’s dangerous as fuck to infer too much from just our own. It’s the conservative fallacy in fact, wherein one assumes that what is or has been must be basically all that is possible. Such stunning and terrifying arrogance.

The point is that unending refrains of, “How would you anarchist nerds ever have wifi routers without slave mines for Coltan in the Congo?” are ridiculously, *militantly* obtuse framings.

Coltan for instance is available from many sources around the world, the Congo representing a tiny percentage, the only reason certain sites see vast ecological destruction or human suffering is social context. And rare indeed is the resource that had no easy to access surface deposits. The vast mines of this world exist in large part because our rulers wanted to retain materials that had been harvested for useless sundries rather than recycle and repurpose them. Gold is useful in consumer electronics, but so little is needed in comparison to the amount wasted as arbitrary signs of wealth. Sufficient electronics to launch an information age could be made using copper easily harvested from surface deposits thousands of years ago. There are many different ways of making semiconductors, batteries, solar panels and the like, many alternative forms requiring different resources. There's no reason to suspect that the approaches that are economical in a world with titanic amounts of force and capital would be similarly economical without. When engineers design technologies they are guided by what resources have been made economically optimal, so if the authoritarian government of China has bulldozed its citizens' land and driven down the price of certain rare earths then research into tools utilizing those rare earths will proceed faster than research into far less destructive alternatives. To claim that social structures and dynamics have no impact on the progression of technologies is insane. And radical changes to our social structures would cause radical changes to our technologies.

The tendency to sweepingly dismiss all green tech as "similar in kind" and ignore orders of magnitude of differences in impact or relevancy is a widespread infection. But what it resembles most is the sort of desperate incantation to preserve one's narrative we mock with "but jet fuel can't melt steel beams". Ratios matter. It matters when we reduce away the work of a hundred people to just one person (or spread out among many people until it's a trivial chore). And, yes, actually a lot of green tech offers dramatic improvements, not merely green capitalist obscuring of the real costs. The people working on green tech aren't all idiots or malicious conspirators.

Primitivists love to present a hierarchy whereby information technologies are only available to a very small number of people thanks to the suffering and colonial enslavement of a great many. But the reality is almost everyone on this planet has a cellphone now; billions have smartphones. The enthusiasm of small villages in Africa setting up low-impact DIY wind turbines to generate electricity for their own purposes, must be distinguished against the many orders of magnitude of unnecessary waste in the first world. Primitivism so often functions as a motte and bailey fallacy, whereby legitimate environmentalist arguments against the vast destructiveness of our present ridiculous and authoritarian infrastructure are suddenly magically extended into arguments against all possible technology — never quite making an argument for how the waste and destruction is supposed to inevitably creep back in.

Invariably an allusion to political reformism is made when you point out avenues by which our infrastructure and commodity use could be changed while retaining and deepening our technological capacity. But such a comparison to reformism is inane; political power is a different beast entirely. The psychology involved in controlling other people is dramatically distinct from the psychology involved in giving them more possibilities. We have good reason to expect control to continue striving for more control. But capacity is different from control. Technology — in the sense of means — doesn't dominate minds, it extends what they can do. You really have play some extremely dubious postmodern shellgames or get lost in crude psychological appeals to avoid that reality.

Similarly desperate are the "growth in a finite system" refrains. The Earth is most emphatically not a closed system, and this fact underpins the very existence of the biosphere. Our ecosystems

would not exist without constantly taking in solar energy from without. In the last fifteen years we've been arguing about this solar technology has blown right through every allegedly 'fundamental' engineering barrier. Meanwhile experts agree that we already have sufficient technology to mine asteroids and — aware of this as well as many asteroids with such abundances of rare metals as to crash global markets or create near post-scarcity — billionaires have been investing in asteroid mining companies. Imagine every mine on the planet shuttering, every mountain top removal project packing up. But again, like every other major technological development going back to satellites, the only response primitivists can muster is to say “science fiction” as sneeringly as possible.

The reality is that the collapse of civilization in a permanent Endgame sense is not guaranteed in the slightest. In fact while there is much that is brittle about our current infrastructure, it is the supposed guarantee of civilization's collapse that has grown increasingly brittle. Collapsists love to rattle off the array of peaks or potential catastrophes as though multiple arguments that are interrelated are stronger than one. It would only take the maturation of a single technology to derail the whole thing. Get cheap energy from fusion or solar panels and you can spend that energy to process and recycle metals, averting peak metal in the process. Get cheap metals and harvesting wind, solar, etc suddenly becomes trivial.

An Endgame collapse is certainly a possibility worth considering seriously, but it is *not* an inevitability. It is also a possibility we must fight to our dying breaths.

In public primitivists are always quick to retreat to the claim that they *don't want to kill seven billion people, there's just literally nothing we can do to stop such an unprecedented holocaust*. What nonsense. Seven billion people is such an astronomical number of people that even the tiniest glimmer of a chance to derail such gigadeath by saving civilization should surely occupy our every waking moment. And press them on this, start talking about liquid fluoride thorium salt reactors (impossible to meltdown, short halflife of products, no utility in making warheads, useful way to get rid of thorium already naturally poisoning the Earth's surface in many places) or the like and very quickly a lot of them will revert to angry declarations that they'd blow up any possible fixes to the collapse.

This response should be highly illustrative of just how paper thin and superficial the fig leaf covering their genocidal misanthropic aspirations are. Primitivism is just another Marxism where you let “inevitable” material conditions do your slaughtering and gulaging for you.

Even as bad as an unparalleled holocaust and retreat to an inescapable and monotonous primitive Eden would be, what is actually likely to emerge would be much worse. It was once common to bandy about “peak metal” and imply that the depletion of rare metals in easily accessible forms wasn't just going to derail industrial civilization and impede it from ever being rebuilt but would stop all forms of empire. Yet the reality is that things like steel would remain, casting us not into the era of hunter gatherers but instead a permanent unending version of the middle ages. And what we will likely see instead of a singular collapse — what any honest primitivist admits to themselves these days — is instead a series of endless catastrophes. There will be no bandaid ripping past which the survivors finally get a measure of relief. The fall of some empires will mean the likely rise of other empires, with different characteristics perhaps, but similar power relations. While some aspects of our world are incredibly fragile, there is presently enough redundancy for the same systems to start up again and be much worse, provided any room for humanity on the planet remains. Brazil for instance is almost entirely run on hydroelectric power. While information technologies and many other liberatory technologies would go away large indus-

trial societies are not going to disappear. A limited number of people hiding the cracks between various Roman Empires is hardly all that enticing of an anarchist vision.

Ecological Collapse

While the end of civilization, anarchistic or not, is hardly guaranteed. Ecological collapse is already a sure thing, an already happening thing. The only question is how bad we'll let it get. And in this abandoning science and proactive technological grappling is a whole bunch of things that end in -cidal.

It's not as simple as "just kill industrial civilization and then the biosphere will get better for human life". Our biosphere isn't magic and it bares no allegiance to anything besides physics. There is no inherent orientation to an equilibrium, much less one that's liveable for humans, or even current terrestrial animals.

I frequently hear green anarchists claim that the solution to global warming is to just stop industrial civilization and let the trees regrow. This is either desperate to the point of delusion or stupendously ignorant of the science of global warming.

Trees temporarily absorb carbon but then promptly re-emit it when they die and decompose or burn. The carbon in the air right now is utterly beyond the capacity of the earth's forests at their peak, and it would take too long for trees to capture enough carbon to derail the current feedbacking. Our oceans are usually the vast vast vast majority of the carbon capture in the normal cycle, and they're stressed beyond their capacity now. Additionally trees can actually *increase* global warming because they're darker and thus absorb more solar radiation. Indeed basically any increase in the size of boreal forests right now would *contribute* to global warming. This is one of the big dangers, actually, that forests will spread in the northern hemisphere as temperatures rise and cause even greater warming.

The carbon that is now in the air isn't part of the normal carbon cycle that trees dealt with, it's carbon that was for hundreds of millions of years locked up *in the Earth*. The last time it was in the atmosphere the Earth was a dramatically different place, inhospitable to a lot of modern organisms. The only solution that can actually save us from the runaway feedback loops we've set off that are releasing methane and the like is to put that carbon back in the earth, back in the rock or similar form. And there is no way to do this without technology and science.

Our only hope is carbon *negative* technologies — technologies that as a byproduct take carbon out of the atmosphere and into a more permanent form. Thankfully there's a vast diversity of avenues by which we can do this, many of which are in production and use already. Some rather advanced, some stunningly simple. Algae are what originally pulled the CO₂ out of the air over millions of years and made our atmosphere breathable. If the feedback process of global warming continues unabated algae blooms in the ocean risk destroying ocean life and creating toxic consequences. Some of my favorite carbon negative technologies generate algae in controlled systems — before algae blooms in the wild destroy even more — in ways that generates energy. The byproduct being both energy for our technologies and trapped carbon. The calculus is changing as the happenstance technologies that were normalized the last couple centuries change. With carbon negative technologies the more energy we consume, the less CO₂ in the atmosphere.

The remaining work at this point is making them even more efficient, figuring out which ones are most optimal, and turning them from technologies to infrastructure (ie widespread production/use). The latter requires some social struggle, but is doable. Primitivists are always accusing scientists and engineers of rushing technologies into development without due diligence, but when we exercise due diligence developing green technologies they pretend as though the delay means they're fundamentally not possible.

Indeed only through the global perspective possible with modern science can we begin to contextualize our actions and their consequences.

Many anti-civ folk are now starting to concede this, but the point is no fringe or marginal one. Massive amounts of toxins and elements are currently locked up in products or infrastructure, to throw up our hands and walk away is to let them leak out. It's not just shitty nuclear plants and biowarfare labs.

And if you expect there to be time and an increase in the popularity of revolutionary perspectives such that revolutionary scientists can help with some decommissioning you're not talking about an inevitable collapse that we'd have no power to avert, you're talking about a deliberative and intentional social change. So why not go further?

We have the capacity not just to avert global warming and ocean acidification but to reclaim the Sahara and restore the megafauna that hunter gatherers killed off. (Contrary to the myth that primitive peoples were somehow aware of ecological externalities beyond their immediate contexts, recent global statistical analyses have conclusively settled that hunter gatherers were responsible for the ecological destruction of the late Quaternary). With the broader insight and perspective provided by science and global communication we finally have an opportunity to repair the mistakes of past generations as we move asymptotically towards greater understanding of our world and thus greater agency within it.

That word, agency, is the core of this divide between anarchism and primitivism.

Primitivists would rather write agency out of the conversation. They want to pretend that we have No Alternative but collapse, no real choices or options to be expanded or diligently explored. Their opposition to technology and cosmopolitanism make perfect sense when the very notion of expanding our choices is taken to be incomprehensible. *Physical freedom? What nonsense, you can't be oppressed by nature!* What's happened to get someone to such a ludicrous position is a divorcing of oppression from anything concrete. Now oppression isn't controlling people or constraining their options in life, it's just anything that conjures bad feels. *Freedom? Well there's no such thing really. Just the freedom from thought, the freedom from choice, complexity, vigilance, etc.*

This kind of obsession with the delusion of certainty is the hallmark of depression. The desperate hunger for the pain of having no real options. Many commentators have noted the turn of our milieu towards treating depression, anxiety and other mental health issues as the essential experience of our radicalism. We bond over sharing in it; and end up fetishizing and reinforcing these ailments.

Only in such light primitivism can pretend to be coherent with anarchism.

But to hunger for the genocide and ecocide of a collapse is to mistake mental health issues for radicalism. Misanthropic edginess for critique. Emotional states for vigilant pursuit of root dynamics.

Conclusion

What I've sketched out here is decidedly not comprehensive — and intentionally so. Primitivism benefits from a vast array of different arguments that end up multiply overlapping each other in an ever-changing patchwork. As with “200 Proofs Earth is Not a Spinning Ball”² what's important to realize is that the individual arguments don't actually have much importance. One could spend years responding to everything Zerzan has written, systemically breaking down his arguments and getting into citation wars, but those who have come to identify as primitivists then happily shift their focus to other writers with alternative arguments. Once one becomes invested in the trappings of the ideology, the community, the culture, the mythos, the fantasies... there's little avenue left for changing one's mind. “Anti-civ” and “post-civ” were supposed to provide more freedom from the ideological prison of primitivism, but the end result has been a larger more amorphous ideological prison, still chained to a center of mass defined by the same old primitivist mistakes.

My intention here has instead been to provide an overview of and gateway to critiques that those in the anti-civ milieu are typically unaware of. (Everyone at this point is well aware of primitivism's vulnerability on trans issues and ableism.) What's been so frustrating to a lot of anarchist hackers, scientists, and former primitivists is that the points I've covered are blindingly obvious to us. But primitivist milieu in its relative memetic isolation has grown a thick shell of uncritically embraced arguments and claims that extend in many many fields and make debate a herculean task.

It must be admitted that this kind of ideological catastrophe is a side effect to the positive feedback loops in complexity unleashed by modern communications technologies. We exist in an early stage where it's still easy for certain positions to quickly accumulate reinforcing cruft until they pass an argument-complexity event horizon that makes them basically unchallengeable. Where perspectives can win not through good arguments but tangled ones; often shifting around between endless fallbacks or implicitly complex but explicitly simple appeals to “common sense” notions.

Arguing with primitivists is a process almost identical to arguing with statist. Tear down one claim and they fall back on a hundred others. Tear down those and they start again invoking the stuff you've already demolished. Try to lay out everything at length and they appeal to how much more has been written by statist, given their superior numbers. Your argument is now too long to read, or too technical and inaccessible. You haven't directly addressed this specific argument made by this specific person in this specific book. Do that and they declare that person irrelevant. Try to hit general trends in their discourse and they decry that as unfair and disconnected. These protective strategies used by dominant ideologies reflect really basic Manufacturing Consent style techniques where all burden is placed upon alternative or dissident perspectives and they are both expected to persuade with very little space to build complicated responses and to tackle every argument immediately. And whatever you do, no matter how much ground you force them to concede, the conversation always ends with a scoff. *Your position is unpopular because my position is common sense among my friends.* Or, even sillier, arguments about tone, wherein the dissident is dismissed for not being sufficiently polite and deferential while banging on the locked doors of their dogma.

² 200 Proofs the Earth is Not a Spinning Ball

And then they claim shit like “the existing needs no further defenders” which is just the most absurd heights of sweeping simplification. And of course takes as its starting point the absurd notion that our existing society is anything but hostile to technological development and diversity.

A critical eye towards how technologies are used or the normalization of certain infrastructural forms does not make you “anti-civ” or a luddite, it makes you a conscious human being with basic critical thinking faculties. Primitivists do not hold a monopoly on examining tools and infrastructure. But such critical analysis should be extended to everything, including our bodies and our biosphere. Radicalism means rejecting simplistic claims about their “nature”, just as it also means rejecting simplistic narratives about abstractions like “civilization”.

The means we adopt can have corruptive influences, they can bend in certain directions, in laziness we can slip into valuing them as ends unto themselves and discarding our original ends. And certain means can be incoherent with the ends they allege to work towards. Anarchism is founded on the recognition that ends and means are deeply interconnected, albeit not magically one-to-one. Ferretting out these dynamics is valid and important work, and green anarchists have made numerous valid individual points on the ossified infrastructure we are imprisoned by. Covering the Earth’s surface with concrete and asphalt is clearly fucked, as is cutting up the biosphere into tiny pieces, etc, etc. We should obviously be conscious and engaged with the means we choose. We should remove the social and infrastructural systems that deny us agency in our means. But as anarchists our critical engagement with means should reflect a desire to expand freedom, not constrain it, to make ultimately possible more means — infinite means even — not less.

Now one can still dismiss opportunities for a freer future as not worth the risk. And one can entirely reject the underlying desires, ideals and ethics that value to intellectual vigilance and positive freedoms. Such an opinion is a coherent one, at least as much as “liberalism”, but it bares almost no relation to anarchy.

Forget bread, forget cake, forget even the bakery, the only anarchist demand is everything.

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William Gillis
A Quick and Dirty Critique of Primitivist & Anti-Civ Thought
2015/10/10

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