

The Conundrums of Dismantling Civilization

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Manifest the simple
embrace the primitive
reduce selfishness
have few desires

— *Laozi*

How do we get there from here?

On the outskirts of Western political counter-culture, anarcho-primitivist philosophers have been some of the most persistent in their questioning of civilization itself. As an alternative they point out the affluence and stability of simple foraging cultures — the few that we have not destroyed or corrupted in our drive to globalization. Although much of this thinking is completely foreign to our mainstream discussion of progress and technology, anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and Richard Lee have clearly documented the leisure and abundance of peoples such as the !Kung San and Australian Aborigines. Thinkers such as John Zerzan and Bob Black have taken this ethnographic work and developed ideas of what healthy human culture could be in the future. Of course, these ideas are still hotly debated but I would like to take them as given for the sake of discussion.

If we accept that simple, non-analytical foraging cultures demonstrate the most proven and stable of human experiments (having been successful for 1 to 2 million years) then the question that comes to my mind is: How do we get there from here? Many respected authors have avoided this question as unanswerable (e.g. Daniel Quinn). I can understand this attitude, as many people are enamoured with giving (or getting) all the answers in pre-packaged form. Hopefully sidestepping the temptation towards prescription, I think we still need to examine the future and some sense of what things might look like.

My personal background includes growing up in an intentional community. This experience showed me that, although many dynamic committed people were involved, most of the underlying assumptions of our culture were never questioned. For modern addicts to civilization, even the most conscientious among us are pre-programmed in ways that undermine our best attempts at collaboration and cultural innovation. Even with gritted teeth and focussed will, we cannot discipline ourselves to act in ways that go against the grain of our programming. We have to deal with the programming itself.

Bob Black observed wryly in his essay *Anarchism And Other Impediments To Anarchy* that “Most anarchists are, frankly, incapable of living in an autonomous cooperative manner.” If those who are the most committed to a complete change in culture are unable to live in the ways they envision, what is wrong?

First problem: “I want my MTV”

I am quite unusual in that I don't crave many of the things we are told to desire by the all-pervasive media. I am vegetarian, don't smoke, drink very little, have little interest in junk food, don't watch TV, don't subscribe to newspapers or magazines (except Richard Heinberg's *Muse-Letter*, of course!) and a few other things that convince many of my friends that I am a self-deprived ascetic. These visible choices (not done in a spirit of self-deprivation, I assure you) may set me aside as marginal in my rural hometown, but there are many more things in which I do participate that go completely unnoticed. I drive an internal combustion motor-vehicle (a Japanese one to help ease my conscience), I heat my home with natural gas, my lights and computer are powered by dams that are killing salmon rivers, I enjoy the internet as a tool of communication and research and love my broad-band connection to it, we buy much of our food (grown elsewhere) from the local outlet of a supermarket chain owned by an individual billionaire, I love music and my CD collection, and I won't even go into the things we have to do to keep our family farm “economically viable”. Although I personally don't want MTV, values such as this still drive most of our civilization in its day-to-day decisions. I know many local people who, despite severe financial problems continue to smoke \$8 a day and watch \$40 of satellite TV a month.

As Thomas J. Elpel wrote in his short but excellent essay *The Art of Nothing*:

Westerners who first met the Shoshonean bands of Indians in the Great Basin Desert typically described them as being “wretched and lazy”. Many observers remarked that they lived in a total wasteland and yet seemed to do nothing to improve their situation. They built no houses or villages, they had few tools or possessions, almost no art, and they stored little food. It seemed that all they did was sit around and do nothing.

To most people on our planet today this would be a description of hell. When we dig a little deeper we find that, like the !Kung and other forager peoples, they had a rich and dynamic cultural wealth. Forager peoples have little interest in what we would call the fruits of civilization — high technology and lasting monuments to progress. To people like the !Kung the cultural network of kinship and friendship was important, along with an intimate knowledge of the world around them. Curiously they seemed to have much more time to enjoy these things than we do our toys. This radically different attitude to what is important is one of the keys to our, now cliché sounding, paradigm shift.

We don't like giving things up. Rightly so, negative philosophy seldom inspires more than a few nihilists, stoics and Zen eccentrics. The problem we have is that we can't see what we might gain in exchange even though it may be right in front of our eyes. I know that I often find myself sitting down in front of the computer instead of getting out into the woods with my daughter. The point isn't more discipline — as a serious practitioner of the martial arts for 18 years I know a little about discipline. The point is a shift in attitude that makes us want to act differently. As

you can see I am still working on this one and certainly can pose as no oracle; however, like alcoholics, we must admit to having a problem before anything can change.

Second Problem: “What do we really Want?”

In order to have a shift in attitude we have to know what we really want. If you have gotten this far, I might guess that you will agree with me when I say that these are not the wants fed to us over the TV, in Newspapers and on the Radio. You may be surprised when I also say that they are not necessarily the values fed to you by the alternative media, ecological movement, or any brand of spiritual enlightenment currently on offer. What do you really want? I have started to figure out a bit of what I really want – but don’t take this for yourself – it is only an indication of where I have been:

I don’t want to work. This is phrased in the negative because we don’t have a concept in our culture for non-work except leisure. Although used by many writers, “leisure” has too many mixed connotations for my taste. I want to spend my time doing things that are enjoyable, non-time stressed and directly relevant to me and my family’s life.

I want a deeper understanding of the living landscape around me. Walking in the forest, skiing through the forest, climbing mountains, searching out berries, following tracks, exploring.

I want time with my family and close friends. Thinking, talking, making music, dancing and playing.

I want a life without struggle. This doesn’t mean without vigorous activity when appropriate (and fun) – it means that our usual conception of the world as a hostile place must be dropped. What would it be like to live as if the universe was not hostile?

When I boil it down, most of the things that I actually spend my time doing are pale substitutes for very simple and fulfilling interaction with friends and the natural world.

Unfortunately, knowing what we want doesn’t necessarily relieve us from the mixed-up desires we have adopted from “mother culture”. It is a pretty good starting place, though. Well, actually, it is the only one. Only when we can occasionally pause and think about our motivations and decisions, will we actually change. People never do anything lasting because they “should” – only when they really want something will it happen.

Third problem: “What is next?”

Given that we might have a better (working) idea of what we really want and that our values are changing, what do we do next? I would have an easier time re-inventing a nuclear submarine than I would coming up with a fully working model of a new society (a sad comment on my education). Some initial steps are important or we will continue to live in our heads, wishing for the day when something might happen to start the process for us.

I won't say a lot about the recommendations normally found in books on saving the world. I will take it for granted that you are driving your car less, recycling your plastic and glass, eating good whole foods, and buying recycled paper. I am more interested in what Daniel Quinn called “survival value”. Move out of the city (but, but, but... no, just do it). Learn some of the skills that your great-grandparents might have assumed to be common. Don't just buy organic food, go and grow it. Do some canning, drying and pickling. Fix/build/sew stuff yourself. Learn some of the skills that the indigenous people of your area would have considered common. Don't assume you will always have matches or a lighter... or a house. Learn how to use your hands. Buy a book on your local plants and/or animals. Learn how to look at the land and see more. Harvest (responsibly) some food from the wild. Get used to some of these ideas and you will start seeing more.

More than anything, though, surround yourself with friends. Many new-age books stress the importance of building “community” but, although I agree in principle, be very careful about false community. Having seen some of the dangers of forced community first-hand, I would start with emphasizing connections with genuine friends. If you enjoy meeting new people, great, but don't stretch yourself thin.

Think about exchange — are there alternatives to money? Local currency is increasing in popularity but, in many cases, barter may be even better. Cultivate generosity — most forager peoples based their lives around sharing. Work less. Buy less. Make more. Read more non-fiction. Think more — imagine more. Home-school your kids. Broaden your range of skills and knowledge. John Zerzan credits division of labour with the progression of cultural alienation. Avoid organizations and hierarchy, think tribally. Remember that authoritarianism is the lifeblood of civilization.

All these disparate-sounding things start to coalesce around a few central ideas. Do it yourself, learn, and share with friends. Even if there is no immediate change, admit to your technological addictions. Above all, play and imagine differently. If there are things in your life that you have been meaning to address but haven't (still smoking?) — now is the time to start thinking about why. Start the process of change with what is right in front of you. If you can't, then just stop reading right now and go flick on the TV.

So what do we have?

I don't pretend that anything happens overnight, but I would like to see many different radical experiments in lifestyle. I can only hope for tolerance from folks who live near to people trying something different. If you include some kind of "intentional community" in your plan I would recommend researching the ones that have been tried in the last century (there have been many). Learning from other people's mistakes is called intelligence. Whatever you choose to do, bravery is a pre-requisite. Worry not about the censure of civil society!

Having a bit of an apocalyptic bent, I agree with the petroleum geologists who forecast a sharp decrease in available oil over the next ten years. An event such as this (and I am willing to be wrong about it) will bring into sharp relief the importance of these skills and changes in attitude.

An old anarchist idea is that the new world must be created within the shell of the old. This means that when civilization collapses — through its own volition, through our efforts, or a combination of the two — there will be an alternative waiting to take its place. This is really necessary as, in the absence of positive alternatives, the social disruption caused by collapse could easily create the psychological insecurity and social vacuum in which fascism and other totalitarian dictatorships could flourish.

John Moore — A Primitivist Primer

Do I expect many people to agree with me in changing values of what is important? No, unfortunately I have been called cynic too many times to seem that optimistic (although I think of myself as more in the tradition of Diogenes than just a post-modern fatalist); however, in the same way that I don't expect everyone I meet to become a close friend, I do hope that there will be some people out there to forge into unknown territory and share their experiences. Who knows, maybe even some more of my friends might want to walk the path together...

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