Primitivism, the belief that humans would be happier without the benefits of civilization is a cranky cult much like UFOs, witchcraft, and creationism. Lately the former cult has developed a following among some self-styled anarchists in the United States. Anarchism tends to tolerate cranks. Unfortunately, when the cranks run most of the anarchist journals, it is difficult to ignore them. Thus Brian Sheppard's skeptical debunking of primitivism is long overdue.

As Sheppard demonstrates, there is little in common between the main ideas of anarchism and this new age "anarcho-primitivism." Anarchism is the left-wing of the socialist movement. It seeks not to destroy civilization, but to use its best parts to build a society based on mutual aid and free associations. The stated aim of the primitivists goes in a direction opposite to anarchism, claiming that the only way humanity can be free is to do away with science, technology, industry, agriculture, literacy, and even language. Although there have always been some oddballs on the fringes of the anarchist movement who sought a return to a peasant life style of subsistence farming, until now no "anarchist" ever advocated that humans re-assimilate with the apes.

Sheppard makes the observation that none of the primitivists practice what they preach. The primitivists use the medium of the internet, and print several journals, including Fifth Estate, Green Anarchy, and the pretentiously named Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed. They use industrial products like cars, trains and bicycles to get around. None of them live in caves or use chest-thumping as a substitute for speech. If pressed on this point, the primitivists will admit their imperfections, but they never admit that primitive living is more attractive in pulp fiction than in practice.

As for the theory of primitivism, it will stand up to scrutiny no better than primitivist practice. Sheppard equates primitivism to the theory of the Stalinist biologist Lysenko: no fact is allowed to stand in the way of ideological progress. For example, to prove that primitive peoples lived a life of leisure and "abundance" before civilization came along, the primitivists mention only those tribes that fit their case. All the counter-examples of primitive peoples who died from intertribal war, starved, suffered from high rates of infant mortality, and so on, are simply ignored.

Where anthropological evidence is insufficient to prove that all primitive peoples lived free and wonderful lives, the primitivists resort to mythology. Without the burden of technology humans lived in a Garden of Eden, they claim. Just as biblical fundamentalists see humanity as having been driven from Paradise for its sins, so too the primitivists see humanity's fall as a result of eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge. The only difference is that the creationists believe that this forbidden knowledge concerns sin, whereas for the primitivists the evil knowledge is science. As with all myths, no proof of these claims is necessary, only blind faith. Those who lack this faith are evil and corrupt by definition.

For the primitivists, the most faithless and evil of all are anarchists who cling to the rational classical views of the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin. The worst of these are supposed to be anarcho-syndicalists, who advocate revolutionary unionism and worker self-management of industry. Since industry is by definition "authoritarian," the primitivists accuse the anarcho-syndicalists of wanting to keep everything the same but with anarchist union leaders as the new
bosses. Again, all evidence to the contrary is ignored. The anarcho-syndicalists must have this intention; otherwise they would burn their workplaces instead of trying to run them democratically. Once you assume that industry can be nothing other than authoritarian, an assumption the primitivists share with the capitalists, Sheppard notes, the circular logic becomes inescapable.

What should be even more disturbing to anarchists is the way the primitivists rationalize brutality and murder. John Zerzan, one of the leading gurus of primitivism, is a cheerleader for the deranged serial killer, Ted Kaczynski. Kaczynski, a.k.a. the "unabomber" randomly murdered people who he blamed for imposing "technology" on him. After Kaczynski was arrested, Zerzan held fundraisers to support him and wrote articles calling on anarchists to follow the unabomber's example. When pressed on the authoritarian nature of murdering those who don't share primitivist beliefs, Zerzan claimed that while he felt uncomfortable with murder, he felt that on another level it might be useful as a way of making a point.

Besides criticizing their hero-worship of Kaczynski, Sheppard joins other anarchist critics who have argued that implementing the primitivist program would lead to mass starvation and disease. Modern humans no longer have the skills for hunting and gathering, or living in crude shelters. Moreover, humans would have to be forced to leave the cities and give up their comforts. Sheppard compares the primitivists to the Khmer Rouge, who tried something similar in Cambodia leading to the notorious "killing fields" and the deaths of thousands. Primitivists shrug off the anti-humanitarian implications of what they advocate.

Sheppard has done anarchism a valuable service for exposing the shallowness of primitivist "thought." Unfortunately Sheppard does not challenge the primitivist claim to be pro-ecology. Not only are the anarchist credentials of the primitivists suspect, but so too is their "greenwash." Aldo Leopold once remarked that when he undertook the environmental restoration of his farm in Sand County that he could not do it by simply letting the land "go wild." Careful management was required to bring the land back after years of human use and abuse. Anyone who understands ecology would have to agree with Leopold. The activities of humans over the past millions of years have caused many changes to our planet. Species once necessary for maintaining eco-systems have become extinct. Leaking landfills and chemical waste dumps pepper the landscape. Lakes and rivers have been killed with chemical runoff and acid rain. The burning of fossil fuels threatens global warming. Science and technology are vitally necessary to reverse these effects. On the other hand, what the primitivists offer as an alternative would lead to an eco-disaster of global proportions.

If all agriculture and industry were to cease and the cities abandoned, six billion people would have to find ways to live a Stone-Age existence. This would mean not only mass starvation, but the devastation of what remains of the wilderness. Most animal species would disappear as they were hunted for food. Edible plants would likewise disappear with no seed being left for next season. Most of the forests would be burned for fuel and add to the problems of soil erosion, water pollution, and global warming. Meanwhile no one would be around to monitor all those leaking land-fills, decommission the nuclear plants, or even bury the stinking carcasses of the dead. Those people who did not die in the first year would die during the aftermath. The mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period would be a picnic in comparison. There is no real
danger that this would happen, of course. Most people outside the primitivist movement have enough sense not to let this happen. The only problem is that to whatever extent people equate anarchism with primitivism, people will avoid anarchism like the plague.

Sheppard might have put "primitivism" in its historical context. Primitivism is a symptom of the decline of the anarchist movement in the U.S. It represents a retreat from any revolutionary program that could be attractive to a broad spectrum of the oppressed, towards a politics of lifestyle for a small marginal cult. It is more than a coincidence that most of the primitivist gurus were Situationists in the 1970s. John Zerzan, for example, used to criticize anarchism as another "wasm," an obsolete ideology. The members of the Fifth Estate also used to tell people that they had "evolved beyond anarchism." The late Freddy Perlman was one of the early publishers of Situationist texts in the U.S. As the fires of revolution burned low in the 1980s, suddenly these same people rediscovered their "anarchism" and moved into the vacuum left by the revolutionary anarchists of the 1960s and 1970s.

There is no clear explanation for why they abandoned Situationism to become "primitivists." Perhaps they recognized that the middle class ecology movement was more trendy and provided more opportunities for poseurs than the labor movement or poor peoples movements. Perhaps it was just the fact that they were all too old to remain students at the university. The modus operandi of the Situationists, however, remains the same: provocative propaganda, outlandish gibberish meant to shock people rather than provide rational argument, the recruitment of bohemian intellectuals and artists, and disdain for the working class. It is unfortunate that the primitivists have been so successful at boring within the anarchist movement. As Sheppard indicates, their success is partly due to the capitalist media that recognizes that the best way to kill the anarchist movement is to portray the likes of John Zerzan and Ted Kaczynsky as anarchist leaders. But some of the blame must rest with anarchists themselves. The failure of the anarchist movement to build an anarchist media that supports its basic ideas has made it easy for a tight-knit minority to speak for everyone.

Article copyright ASR: Anarcho-Syndicalist Review.

Copyright Editorial Collective Winter 2004

Word count: 1530

Indexing (details)

Cite
Subject
Anarchism;
Literature;
Nonfiction;
Politics;
Socialism
Title
TARZAN The Anarchist; Anarchism vs. Primitivism, by Brian Oliver Sheppard