

# Anarchy & the Sacred

In response to “More Minneapolis Anarchy”

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

*FE Note:* This is a response to “More Minneapolis Anarchy,” the letters beginning on the previous page.

To Joe Wojack, first of all, let me emphasize that I was in no way discouraging people from reading the anarchist classics; on the contrary, I stated plainly in my article that anarchists “must critically view their own counter-culture, history and current trajectory.” This could not happen without a critical reading of the literature of the classic proletarian revolutionary movements, of both marxist and anarchist material, and, in fact, of the history of radical revolts since antiquity.

It also means reading the rich body of critical material on the transformations of the modern world, in anthropology, the critique of technology and science, discussions of mass society, ecology and other related fields that 19<sup>th</sup> Century anarchist and socialist writers could simply have not foreseen.

The anarchist vision, in other words, if it is to remain true to its own spirit, must evolve and grow. Otherwise, we are left with the brittle shell of a century-old ideology—the anarchism of ideologues. It is their ideology—saturated as it was with the productivism it shared with proletarian socialism, fascination with technology and science, and a positivist, religious faith in the mystique of material progress—which must be critically assessed if the anarchist vision is to evolve and become relevant to our time, and simply reading 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries will not suffice in doing so.

Jon Bekken’s self-serving diatribe unwittingly provides an example of what I am talking about. First of all, I should note that for the sake of his own argument he distorts what I wrote in my essentially favorable and positive article on the gathering (and obscures my central point in the section to which he objects, which was to raise criticism of the pagans). He accuses me of opposing “rationality,” an ambiguous and problematic word, when it was specifically his positivist rationalism I attacked (since what constitutes genuine rationality is at least open to debate).

Bekken also dismisses the contemporary rediscovery of humankind’s primal roots as original anarchies as “superstition and romantic nostalgia for the days when we lived in caves,” reflecting his own ignorance of the critical advances that have taken place in anthropological literature over the last twenty years, that have merged with an anarchist and communitarian perspective to open up whole new areas of discussion of modern civilization, human community, and the nature of hierarchical power.

Bekken’s picketing and dismissal of the pagans is the priggish and intolerant response of a church hierarch: no discussions of the sacred or of a community with nature in this atheist sanctorium. Only science, only an instrumental relation with nature, only this ideological materialism (now being undermined by its own researches at the limits of science) are accepted.

Not only is speech suppressed in this authoritarian response, but the fundamental sources of domination in the present capitalist megamachine—scientific domination and exploitation of nature and humanity, mass technological organization of society, the transformation of human cultures by technology, the universal ideology-religion

of productivism and development—are left untouched. Bekken is, in a word, an anarcrat who wants to impose ideological orthodoxy on a diverse movement.

Century-old modes of discourse, which should have been long-ago abandoned in recognition of the transformation of the forces of domination, end up in his schema as the basis for association. Sorry, but I don't find his religion any more acceptable than an uncritical paganism (and perhaps less so).

Bekken implies that I wrote of the need to go “beyond anarchism,” when, in fact, all I said was that such a theme, proposed by someone at the gathering, “might have led in an interesting direction.” But I'll take this opportunity to demonstrate an area where classical anarchist writings fall short of understanding the forces of domination, and therefore, the sources of liberty: the question of technology and science. This was done to some degree in our special 1981 issue on technology in an article, “Marxism, Anarchism and the Roots of the New Totalitarianism,” and, in other debates in the FE (see our book page), but I think it merits more discussion here.

There are definitely contradictory currents within anarchism regarding technology, but it is fair to say that the dominant perspective has been productivist and scientific in embracing technological development. As in marxian socialism, scientific-technological development is uncritically perceived as a liberating force.

Kropotkin, for example, wrote in *An Appeal to the Young*, “It is now no longer a question of accumulating scientific truths and discoveries...”

We have to make science no longer a luxury but the foundation of every man's life.” And Bakunin argued, “We recognize then the absolute authority of science...Outside of this only legitimate authority, legitimate because it is rational and is in harmony with human liberty, we declare all other authorities false, arbitrary and fatal. Proudhon, following this current, stressed the “need for centralization and large industrial units...Do not workers' associations for the operation of heavy industry mean large units?”

In these affirmations of the trajectory of mass technological development that capital itself was undertaking, there was little in the way of a recognition of mass technics as an emergent social system, a planetary work pyramid. It would take another fifty to seventy-five years of capitalist development for such a critique to appear, in the post-World War II critiques of technology in historical and sociological literature, in particular the insights of Lewis Mumford's description of the industrial megamachine that grew out of the crucible of World War and the convergence of nuclearism, mass war techniques and cybernetic planning. This new mode of society, Mumford realized, reiterated in many ways the ancient slave states, and would have consequent effects on human community and the human personality which would spell even greater dangers for human freedom.

But ideological anarchists, especially the syndicalists like Bekken, haven't read Mumford; they have their noses stuck in Bakunin, who when he was at his worst, described the modern megamachine in the most positive terms. Writing on workers' cooperatives, he argued, “one can only guess at the immense development which surely awaits them and the new political and social conditions they will generate. It is not only possible but probable that they will, in time, outgrow the limits of today's counties, provinces, and even states to transform the whole structure of human society, which will no longer be divided into nations but into industrial units.”

Anarchist writer Daniel Guerin added, commenting on this passage, that “these would then ‘form a vast economic federation’ with a supreme assembly at its head. With the help of ‘world-wide statistics, giving data as comprehensive as they are detailed and precise,’ it would balance supply and demand, direct, distribute and share out world industrial production among the different countries so that crises in trade and employment, enforced stagnation, economic disaster, and loss of capital would almost certainly entirely disappear” (Guerin, *Anarchism*).

This technocratic-cybernetic vision has nothing in common with a really libertarian society. As Eugene Schwartz remarks in his book, *Overskill: The Decline of Technology in Modern Civilization*, “Cybernetics is for automata, and the planned society is a prelude to the universal concentration camp.”

Writers like Mumford, Schwartz, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Jacques Ellul, and other critics of modern technology are not on the anarcho-syndicalist's reading list, so they do not comprehend the contemporary forces of domination that a vision of authentic human freedom must confront. Joseph Weizenbaum's important book, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, reveals the fallacy of such uncritical attitudes towards technology. Tools and machines are not mere instruments, he argues, “they are pregnant symbols in themselves...A tool is a model for its own reproduction and a script for the re-enactment of the skills it symbolizes... [it] thus transcends its role as a practical means towards certain ends: it is a constituent of man's symbolic re-creation of his world.”

So, modern technological civilization has come to undermine and reshape culture and meaning. As Max Horkheimer wrote in *The Eclipse of Reason* on the outcome of the positivism shared by the anarchists, “concepts have become ‘streamlined,’ rationalized, labor-saving devices...in short, made part and parcel of production. Meaning has become entirely transformed into function...only one authority, namely, science, conceived as the classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities,” can now be recognized. A very interesting closing of the circle started by Bakunin’s genuflection to science.

At least one can say for the pagans that their symbolic connection of the world starts with nature and not the machine and the factory so worshipped by the syndicalist, which is why syndicalists are so threatened by their intuition of the sacred in the living world. As Jacques Ellul has observed, in *Technological Society*, “there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself. In the world in which we live, technique has become the essential mystery...” And further on he comments, “Technique is the hope of the proletarians; they can have faith in it because its miracles are visible and progressive.”

It is no less astonishing than the highest manifestations of magic once were, and it is worshipped as an idol would have been worshipped, with the same simplicity and fear.”

## **The Technological Society**

This religious fervor will have nothing to do with any re-manifestation of the old nature religions. It is imperative for those who share in this complex mythology of western civilization to absolutely deny any legitimacy of the lifeways or visions of our primal ancestors. But in some sense inaccessible to scientific-instrumentalist rationalism, the natural world is our mother and living beings our cousins, and in this sense they have spirit and participate in a reciprocal communication and symbiosis with us (in fact ecological science has essentially confirmed this notion of interrelatedness). Anarcho-syndicalists, like liberal statist, as Paul Feyerabend observes in *Science in a Free Society*, “regard rationalism (which for them coincides with science) not just as one view among many, but as a basis for society. The freedom they defend is therefore granted under conditions that are no longer subjected to it. It is granted only to those who have already accepted part of the rationalist (i.e. scientific) ideology.” For them, “The excellence of science is assumed, it is not argued for. Here scientists and philosophers of science act like the defenders of the One and Only Roman Church acted before them: Church doctrine is true, everything else is Pagan nonsense...the assumption of the inherent superiority of science has moved beyond science and has become an article of faith for almost everyone.” Science has become an integral component of society, just as the church was. “Of course, even where church and state are carefully separated, science and the state are completely integrated.”

But the ideology of scientific objectivity is itself based on faith, on an irrational dogma that by posing as the only valid form of knowledge not only mystifies its own ideological foundations and leap of faith, but corrodes the possibility for a free discourse about the world in the way that Bekken’s crude call to expel pagans from the anarchist gathering did. This scientific mystique, as Weizenbaum argues, is itself “an elaborate structure built on piles that are anchored, not on bedrock as is commonly supposed, but on the shifting sand of fallible human judgment, conjecture, and intuition.”

Weizenbaum notes that the scientific demonstrations that the average person accepts on faith are themselves “fundamentally acts of persuasion.” But, “infected with the germ of logical necessity,” they claim to describe how things “actually are” and must be. “In short, they convert truth to provability,” and reduce reality. “Belief in the rationality-logicality equation has corroded the prophetic power of language itself.”

Because anarchists question and confront all forms of authority and do not reduce the social question to one of class domination and exploitation as do marxists and syndicalists, one would think that there would be an open attitude and exploratory approach to the emerging critique of technological civilization and the dominant scientific-instrumentalist ideology that supports it and is engendered by it. Anarchists have always looked at the whole human being and the whole society, and explored other areas of domination and autonomy ignored by classical liberal and socialist perspectives. Anarchists should be receptive to the animist vision of interrelatedness and

natural reciprocity and symbiosis: after all, such an attitude is suggested in the best passages of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*.

There is also an underlying critique of technology in the classical anarchists if one looks carefully, for example, Bakunin's criticism of Marx's statism and support for material and economic development, in his prescient comment that "finally, when all the other classes have exhausted themselves, the State then becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class and then falls—or if you will, rises—to the position of a machine." This very suggestive remark indicates the trajectory of capital towards a megatechnic civilization that might leave the classic bourgeoisie and proletariat behind. (See John Clark's essay "Marx, Bakunin and Social Transformation," in his book *The Anarchist Moment*). Marcus Graham was also accurate in his appraisal of the anarchist tradition as far back as 1934, when he wrote that he thought that "the future will prove Kropotkin, from an Anarchist point of view, has, in accepting thus the machine [as an instrument of human liberation], made one of the gravest errors. Such an attitude was perfectly logical for the Marxian school of thought, but certainly not for the Anarchist." [See "What Ought to be the Anarchist Attitude Towards the Machine" on the Anarchist Library.]

So too did liberal historian Irving L. Horowitz point out in his book *The Anarchists*, that the marxists had an advantage over the anarchists, since the marxists put their faith in developing technology, while the anarchists "never confronted," except in the later stages of the classical movement, "the problems of a vast technology," but rather ignored them by calling for a society "that was satisfying to the individual producer rather than feasible for a growing mass society...The anarchist literature contains a strong element of nostalgia, a harkening back to a situation where workshops were small, where relationships were manageable, where people experienced affective responses with each other. Technology and the material benefits of science were never seriously entertained by the anarchists except in a ministerial contempt for that which destroys the natural man."

Considering the anarchist quotes I gathered above, Horowitz's argument is not entirely accurate, yet he makes it for the same reasons that Bekken attacks the perspectives of the FE. Anarchism is not valid in Horowitz's view because it has not kept pace with technological progress. "We are in a technological era that is qualitatively different, that brings forward entirely new forms of social behavior and social existence. Much as we prefer not to breed fragmented specialists, it is impossible to envision the era of hydrogen power and mass electrification in terms of simple, spontaneous association of individual craftsmen. The forms of technology moving from craft to a network of minutely separated functions have, therefore, tended to undermine the idea of the anarchist Everyman."

## **Militants Who Wear the Word**

Horowitz's argument is compelling, but it is posed backwards. Technology has certainly transformed the world, but it is the wrong question to ask whether the anarchist vision of freedom, autonomy and mutual cooperation is any longer relevant to mass technological civilization. It is a more incisive observation to ask whether freedom, autonomy or human cooperation themselves can be possible in such a civilization.

I don't think that they can coexist with it, which is why the anarchist vision does remain "more relevant than ever," but not for the reasons the syndicalist Bekken believes. Considering that critics of anarchism recognize an anti-technological current in it, and that this critique can be found in the tradition itself if one reads carefully and critically, perhaps the FE is closer to the genuine anarchist tradition, particularly in its capacity to evolve and to confront the evolving forms of domination, than the anarchist militants who wear the word on their sleeves.

Despite Bekken's contempt for the growing interest in the lives and visions of primal peoples, that interest too resides in the anarchist tradition. As Alex Comfort writes in the introduction to Harold Barclay's out-of-print *People Without Government*, "The challenge 'go run a modern state like a pygmy village and see what happens' misses the rather unusual cast of mind which anarchists seek to impart. Unlike Marxism or democratic capitalism which are institutionalized theories, the rejection of authority as a social tool is an attitude, not a programme. Once adopted it patterns the kinds of solutions we are disposed to accept."

The growing reassessment of our primitive, animist roots has come to recognize that along with an authoritarian hierarchical and instrumentalist civilization goes an authoritarian, unitary, homogenized and instrumental form of knowledge. The rationalist wants to suppress the otherness of nature and spirit, to reduce nature to a passive

object for domination and to banish spirit altogether. But, as poet Antonio Machado has written, this other “refuses to disappear; it subsists, it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth.”

But, as the repressive, pathological and destructive character of instrumental civilization is more and more apparent to everyone, this primal other is reasserting itself, leading to what Jamake Highwater has called “a variety of attempts to regain contact with the roots of traditions which, viewed by progressive thinkers as old-fashioned and obsolete, have slipped into oblivion...From the polysynthetic metaphysics of nature envisioned by primal peoples, from a nature immediately experienced rather than dubiously abstracted, arises a premise that addresses itself with particular force to the root causes of many contemporary problems, especially to our so-called ecological crisis.” And Highwater quotes Joseph Epes Brown, author of many books of Native American spiritual traditions, “It is perhaps this message of the sacred nature of the land that today has been most responsible for forcing the Native American vision upon the mind and consciousness of the non-Indian.”

Bekken asks what could go beyond anarchism, as if I hadn’t already suggested this in my article. Quoting George Woodcock’s history of anarchism that the anarchist idea “is not merely older than the historical anarchist movement, but it has also spread far beyond its boundaries,” I posed anarchy as a general perspective that by renewing the vision of the primitive, animist anarchies and combining it with contemporary forms of revolt, could move “beyond ideology towards genuine radical transformation.”

How much clearer must I be? I’ll try. I think Epes Brown’s remark suggests something—a vision of human liberation and a cooperative, nonhierarchical society will go nowhere if it does not reject the present technological, social and economic structures of life, and unless it is linked to a renewal of the sacredness of nature, its interrelatedness, and our connectedness to it.

If we cannot see the fundamental spirit that resides in the natural world, we cannot envision the intangible human spirit of liberty that has motivated the anarchist project from the beginning either. A society operating under an abstracted, rationalized and instrumentalist relationship to the natural world only recreates such relations between human beings; the domination of nature and the domination of human beings originated together, and it is together that they must be abolished.

*Postscript:* Lost in this is the argument I made that the pagans should practice caution in their attempts to recreate this sense of the sacred and in their use of ritual, that there are dangers in the recreation of primal traditions by detribalized moderns that cannot be dismissed, that a certain measure of scepticism and self-restraint is necessary. A sense of the sacred, even of the sacred in nature, can be manipulated for authoritarian purposes.

The ancient Egyptian slave state, as Murray Bookchin notes in his recent slam on deep ecology, is a good example of such a phenomenon. Unfortunately, we got no response on this criticism from the pagans, only on the aside I made on the rationalists, who I said should take a year and sit in the woods and read some books on primal peoples (Bekken may need two or three years). I’d like to hear from the pagans; are any of you Minneapolis pagans listening?

# fifth Estate

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