

All Isms are Wasms

David Watson

Introduction by Sunfrog

As one of the more outspoken non-atheists in the FE collective, it's fitting that one of my early memories of the project was an argument about religion. I was hanging out in the office under the auspices of helping the collective members in their battle to stop the Detroit trash incinerator. While I could usually hold my rhetorical own, I was outnumbered and intellectually outgunned that afternoon in early 1988. Before I left the office that day, one of the collective members pulled me aside, sensing that I was feeling emotionally bruised after taking such a verbal beating. He encouraged me not to take the discussion personally, told me that he valued my participation, and gave me a book by Frederick Turner called *Beyond Geography*. If it weren't for that gesture by David Watson, I wonder if I might not be here as a co-editor, writing this intro to his most recent article.

I remember how people used to talk about "the FE perspective," an assumed set of understandings that defined the project. Alongside the indispensable contributions of Peter Werbe, no other voice defined "the critique" like Watson's. With his earlier work as George Bradford and under various other pseudonyms, Watson was incredibly prolific between 1980 and 1995. Much of this work is compiled in his anthology *Against the Megamachine*, published by Autonomedia in 1998.

When our comrades at another anti-authoritarian journal called us an "anti-civilization, anarcho-primitivist tabloid" in review after review, the label stuck largely because of David's probing philosophical discussions of deep ecology, industrial technology, and human community. (Granted, other writers like Zerzan and Perlman were published in FE, but David's voice was the most consistent within the publishing collective.) While the contributions here represent David's careful distancing of himself from the current primitivist milieu, he stands by most of what he wrote as part of that critique, from "Civilization is Like a Jetliner" to "Civilization in Bulk." Since FE moved its primary operations to Tennessee in 2002, Watson has continued to write, but he's no longer as active a member of the editorial collective as he once was.

This issue's theme comes closest to that old-school "perspective" and still more deeply recognizes the ambiguities and contradictions of staking out tentative claims on the crucial questions facing the planet. In featuring David to talk about primitivism, we understand that there never really was an "FE perspective" in the sense that others meant it—but rather the many perspectives of our many writers and editors in an always shifting and evolving collective. We continue debates with other journals and amongst ourselves, live our critique in our communities and in the streets, and welcome newcomers to our projects. I'm glad that David welcomed me in 1988, and I'm pleased to welcome his voice back to our pages this summer, after a brief absence.

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Anyone around the anarchist milieu long enough—it suddenly occurs to me that I am talking about some thirty years—and who has been fairly alert, might remember the useful aphorism, one of my favorites, All “isms” are wasms. (Those who don’t are still welcome to make use of it.)

Had I known that the primitivism a few of us were talking about in the 1980s would become what it seems to be now—a kind of political tendency with its peculiar repertoire of shibboleths, its party spirit, its sacred cows (or are they sacred caribou?), I would have written rather different articles on the subject. But it was a learning process for me, and I think I am continuing to learn a few things.

At the time, I considered them fairly tentative, and I intended them to be humble. I simply don’t think it a good idea to make claims greater than one needs to make, or greater than one can reasonably defend—excessive claims, for example, like the idea that it was all downhill since humans engaged in symbolic behavior, or started talking (Abolish the larynx!); or that once we burn all the schools and clinics down people will start to teach and learn and heal themselves, with anarcho-primitivist free schools and dandelion tea; or that “everything”—the “totality” of the civilization we’re in and that is in us—must be destroyed or abolished, and “nothing”—not a single thing we do, tool we use, mediation, or aspect of culture, apparently—should be retained or reformed. (1)

The excerpt following this introduction comes from a long essay I wrote in late 1997 as a kind of coda to my 1996 book, *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (Autonomedia/Black & Red). Starting with a feud that occurred between “neoists” and green anarchists in England, it discussed the politics of militant primitivism, eco-fascism, and other such themes.

Besides being a survey of the contribution, limits, and ultimate follies of Murray Bookchin’s eco-anarchism, *Beyond Bookchin* was a defense of what I called an “informed primitivist vision.” Bookchin’s attacks on this perspective, like his attacks on what he called “lifestyle anarchism,” were based on lurid caricature ‘and Bookchin’s own notable talent for vitriol and calumny, but like any stereotype, some of his characterizations did inevitably correspond to a small number of “primitivists.”

In the last footnote on the last page of the book, I wrote that beyond the scope of my critique of Bookchin was a needed discussion of actual problems with the primitivist insight among radical ecology activists and anarchists, particularly “its devolution into a simplistic creed.” I added, “Because of the almost gravitational propensity of theory to degenerate into dogma, those who affirm primal origins must nevertheless resist the temptation to call themselves ‘primitivists.’—

The “Swamp Fever” essay and the subsequent letters exchange in the Summer 1998 FE took up some of these matters. I reread them after I was asked to respond to the theme, “Reconsidering Primitivism,” and found that most of what needed to be said had already been said in them.

Primitivism is appealing because it is based, like other ideologies, on general but reasonable insights: first of all that the ideology of progress, as anthropologist Stanley Diamond argued, is “the basic apology for imperialism”; and that the search for the primitive, the “minimally human,” is a natural response to modern alienation, “consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is a precondition for our survival.” Primitivism also draws from a palpable truth, though one need not be a primitivist to notice it—that modern civilization is heading, sooner or later, toward catastrophic collapse.

It is no surprise that anarcho-primitivism has attracted some of the most spirited, idealistic, reflective, and committed young radicals out there to its ranks. The defense of the natural world, of wildness, of primal insight, of the possibility of an authentic life, informs and motivates many activists to engage in brave and often inspiring acts of resistance. When I see pictures of those mostly young anarchists and radicals facing off cops in demonstrations, I am proud of them and scared for them and inspired by them.

But insight into the wisdom and sanity in primitive and ancient human lifeways on the one hand, and into the suicidal nature of industrial capitalism on the other, should hardly require an ism, primitive or otherwise. These are insights accessible to all—insights that can only raise extremely useful questions about life, but which cannot provide simple answers on how to work practically to transform society, to reverse, escape, or heal this terrible plague.

In the old days we used to argue—rather arrogantly and glibly, I think in retrospect—that we had no ideology but rather a theory or theories. Theory, our distinction went, is when you have ideas; ideology is when your ideas have you. It occurred to me later that theories, at least in politics and history, are little more than opinions—however layered they may be with citation, be it valuable or specious, from academic sophists and others. I have come to think that a few good questions are worth a thousand theories.

Despite simplistic legends of a coherent, primitivist Golden Age at the FE overseen by Fredy Perlman, we always described our group as being only in general agreement, and avoided the fetish of purity or consistency, and argued incessantly among ourselves and with others. (John Sinclair, who was for a time our Official Political Prisoner back in the 1970s, commented aptly in the 1980s that we spent ninety percent of our time arguing with people with whom we were in ninety percent agreement. And Fredy quipped famously that the only -ist he was, was a cellist.)

Much of anarcho-primitivism today, however small the milieu may be, seems to be falling into the thrall of a simplistic ideology that pretends to have a global response to an unprecedented crisis in what it means to be human—sort of like Oedipus figuring out the plague at Thebes by answering a riddle: let's all become foragers again!

This attitude took on life after the Black Bloc's fifteen minutes of fame in Seattle, when John Zerzan became the poster boy of anarchist anti-globalization and publicist for Ted Kaczynski in *The New York Times*. It is a kind of "clash of civilizations" idea that compresses a multiplicity of human experience into a binary opposition—not, as in Samuel P. Huntington's well-known caricature, a clash of two essentially opposed civilizations, but a reductionist legend in which primordial paradise is undermined by an ur-act of domestication so far back in time that one may as well give up speech, abandon the garden, and roll over and die. It is an apocalyptic vision in the fundamentalist sense, a fundamentalism like other fundamentalisms, though it is not likely to compete successfully with two other communitarian (though authoritarian) responses to the breakdown on urban-industrial capitalism, fundamentalist Islam and Pentecostalism. (2)

Back in the early 1980s, many of us at the FE argued against a focus on single symptoms of the problem and called on people to link up their various movements of resistance to the megamachine. When they did so, it wasn't to go back to a forager existence—which, in fact, we had never suggested. They were generally defending their vernacular village societies and their hard-won skills and knowledge and independence. We had called for some Native American-style Ghost Dance and gotten Gandhi's Salt March instead.

However we had imagined it, anti-globalization and opposition to the megamachine in practice meant fierce resistance against global corporate domination with a very gentle and respectful attitude toward the myriad forms of life people had already established—for small farmers, small towns, green belts, tribal peoples and their land claims, local culture, workers' rights, human rights, anti-racism and anti-nationalism, appropriate technics, and other campaigns to which a certain ur-primitivism, with its all-or-nothingism, has not even a minimal response.

Whatever our opinion about the origins of alienation, we are not absolved of ethical responsibility to the context of social crisis, issues of justice, and practical realities we face. I am far more interested in the actual radical subjectivity of human beings than in maintaining an ideological position. This requires an appreciation for reality and a recognition of ambivalence, of the dialectical relationship between what we once were, what we now are, and what we might become. It is certainly easy, if clearly fatuous, to tell people to "destroy civilization," to abandon cities, burn down schools and hospitals, burn down "the totality," as I am reminded too often by anarcho-primitivist screeds. But people, including native peoples, are not even remotely interested in such fantasies; in fact, they have many objectives that cut against this anti-civ *idée fixe*. The choice radicals have is to maintain their ideology, their *idée* (whoopee) at all costs or drop their armor and rethink the subjectivity of the actual people and places they want to defend.

If militant primitivists claim to be working (fighting, even) in the name of something greater than this human subjectivity, my question is, from what vantage point do they make their claim? This is merely a reappearance of the old deep ecology catastrophism and eco-jihad of the 1980s, which posited nature as a greater good than humanity, and posed as a warrior elite that spoke for wild nature in a war of the end of the world, taking the side of the bears against humankind, as John Muir famously said he would prefer to do. One wonders why anyone would bother to become a militant of such a tendency, since, as they know, Shiva needs no help from such termites in scouring us from the planet and cheerfully turning us into one more layer of sediment. Problem solved—nature saved.

In the 1990s, I followed the events in Bosnia with a sense of deep despair and rage, but also with a profound admiration for those Bosnians fighting to defend what they called “civilization”—by which they meant civility, tolerance, democracy, human rights, and most pointedly, the possibility that different religious and ethnic groups could and should live and work together to resist ethno-fascism and barbarism. Their terms didn’t line up with ideological primitivism, which sees every evil as the result of an undifferentiated civilization, but these people were fighting—and dying—for a different idea of civilization, which corresponded to the essential human minimum my idea of an informed primitivist insight necessarily had to affirm.

In Dobrinja, a suburb of Sarajevo near the airport, the multiethnic community had been overrun by Karadzic’s Serb ethno-fascists, only to rout them and set up an admirable, communal defense. During the siege, the people of Sarajevo proper joked about the “People’s Republic of Dobrinja” because of the kind of self-managed defense and austere egalitarianism of the suburb’s defenders. I remember hearing a radio report on the town and an interview with its anti-nationalist defenders. One said that their orientation had to become one of “more pragmatism, less arrogance.” Whatever the failures of the defenders of Dobrinja (and every positive human endeavor must have its limits and failures), I thought this good and useful advice. I have tried to follow it since then. (3)

If a perspective based on respect for the minimally human, including the insights of primitive and archaic societies, is to understand anything at all, it is that the fundamental problems facing humanity are in many ways the old problems, the human pathology, if I may be permitted a biblical metaphor, of Adam or Eve, or at least the fratricide of Cain and Abel. Abel and Cain started the ball rolling toward the megamachine, and despite a plethora of earnest explanations, it is not clear to anyone exactly how or why it came about. Every cause is inevitably preceded by another. The megamachine and the massacre, the two most salient features of the ancient empires and our own, actually represent amalgamations of prehistoric and historic factors, combining conditioning in the emergent repressive society, yes, with fundamental and not easily explainable irrationalities that probably come with the mystery and perhaps inescapably tragic dimension of being human. (4) What perhaps still makes me some sort of primitivist, to make momentary use of that label, is partly the recognition that we face the age-old, unresolved problems along with the accumulation of the complicated new ones to which they have carried us.

And because civilization is in crisis and heading for self-destruction, it is unlikely that any single group or individual has The Answer to this spiral downward. (5)

None of this should be taken to mean that I now reject what I have previously written about primal societies, as the following excerpt will hopefully confirm. I still agree with Thoreau that in wildness is the preservation of the world, and with Diogenes and the old taoists and the native wisdom of Black Elk and Luther Standing Bear, with what Thoreau called “tawny grammar ... a kind of mother-wit” derived from “this vast, savage; howling mother of ours, Nature”—the wisdom of prehistory. (6) But I also have obligations to the Here and Now, to places like Dobrinja and Detroit—so I honor the hard lessons learned from history, too. And I continue to learn from them, like it or not.

Ironically, in its apparent certainty that it has the answer to an unprecedented world-historical crisis, political ur-primitivism, at least of the super-militant zerzanista variety, has tended to undermine the core insights that an emerging critique of progress and civilization might offer. An epistemological luddism as a school of life or communal inquiry that looks at social, political, technical, ecological, and scientific practice in order to raise questions about our mediations and tools, will certainly offer valuable suggestions about a way out of this nightmare. So would an affirmation of the primitive as well as of archaic, lifeways and forms of knowledge now disappearing under the bulldozer’s blade of global capital.

In contrast, a simplistic primitivism that declares in some Pyrrhic gesture that “everything” must go is merely proof that Blake was mistaken when he insisted that the fool who persists in his folly will become wise. The fool who persists in his folly might simply become a greater fool. (7)

It’s a big world out there. No one has The Answer because there is no single, simple answer. More pragmatism, less arrogance.

Endnotes

1. While most of the chain- and sword-rattling zerzanistas who make up the Eugene-based *Green Anarchy* milieu would reject this caricature and like to see themselves as nuanced, anti-ideological, and open to critique, it's not always obvious from reading the pages of their journals.

2. For a fascinating and disquieting look into these other millenarian isms, see Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums," in *New Left Review* 26, March -April 2004, available at <http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR26001.shtml>

For Huntington's essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" see *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, and for an excellent critique, see Edward Said's "The Clash of Ignorance," posted on *The Nation* website on October 4, 2001.

A radical response to the breakdown of urban-industrial civilization and the rival empires now flaying the planet will have to face those powerful isms along with the general inertia that feeds the machine—both McWorld and Jihad, as Benjamin Barber has described them. See his *Jihad Versus Mc World: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (1996).

3. My admiration for the communards at Dobrinja contributed to my deepening interest in the wars in the breakup of Yugoslavia, to the lessons it might offer, and to a study I hope to publish later this year. In the current issue of *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, a crude ur-primitivist has attacked me for my taking the editors of that magazine to task for printing apologetics for Balkan perpetrators of genocide. They had done so in the *Alternative Press Review*, where, despite their pretensions of being part of a "post-left" perspective, they have provided lavish space to Slobodan Milosevic to defend himself, to the stalinoid "media critic" (and now head of the U.S. Committee to Free Milosevic) Michael Parenti, and to socialist apologists of Serb ethno-fascism of the leftist cult, the World Socialist Website. The letter writer fumes that the Balkan wars were "a close call at the time [?], but that was years ago and only someone who has lost it as severely as Watson then—shrilly asserting his confused 'humanity' over everyone else's implied 'inhumanity'—still makes an issue of it now." The Balkan wars were no "close call" to anyone willing to pay attention and resist leftist ideological prejudices, and therefore it was a relative no-brainer to be able to distinguish solidarity and anti-fascism from complacency about ethno-fascist genocide. Those who failed—ironically, this includes with a perverse vengeance those "anti-ideology" ideologues at *Anarchy*—did so because they were trapped in unacknowledged leftist ideological blinders. But it is also rich to read from an avowed primitivist, with his focus on the ur-paradise before language, time, and number, that the Balkan wars, which were still being fought intensely in 1999 to 2000 and could break out again, were "years ago" and thus irrelevant. Outside the narrow mantras of ur-primitivism, nothing computes. See my essay, "Milosevic 'Crucified': Counter-Spin as Useful Idiocy," in the Fall 2002 Fifth Estate, also available at <http://www.glypx.com/BalkanWitness/watson2.htm>

4. For a useful description of the massacre as a product of primitive societies turning into ancient state societies, see Penny Roberts and Mark Levene's introduction to their collection, *The Massacre in History* (1999).

5. Here I should explain that the title of this introduction comes from Chellis Glendinning's book, *My Name is Chellis & I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*, which besides its occasional insights reproduces all of the inanities of the primitivist ideology, and adds a few of its own. "Mental-health professionals," she observes, including herself among this group, "tell us that a whopping 96 percent of our families suffer from dysfunction of one sort or another, and that the disorder is imprinted and carried on from generation to generation." Of course, that such professionals might think this for a variety of reasons, including professional self-interest and in-group ideological factors, doesn't arise. Glendinning goes on to argue that this dysfunction comes from the trauma of domestication, all the way back to that original ur-moment in the neolithic, over thirty-five thousand generations ago, when some ur-domesticator ended "unmediated communication with the forces of the natural world" at "the moment, we purposefully isolated domestic plants from natural ones." That many of her examples of non-alienated natural peoples are themselves cultivators, like the Hopi and Papago, doesn't seem to matter. Weirdly, small world that this is, in his acknowledgements, Michael Parenti warmly thanks Glendinning for her support in helping him finish his revisionist cesspool of a book, *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia* (Verso, 2000). Someone else will have to figure out how this gentle primitivist mental-health professional ended up contributing to Parenti's psychotic text, which has since been translated into Serbian and published in Belgrade with an appreciative preface by Milosevic himself.

6. See Thoreau's essay "Walking." Gary Snyder's essay "Tawny Grammar," in his *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), takes up Thoreau's point, in a dazzling synthesis of primitive, ancient and modern. I disagree here and there with Snyder, but his book is indispensable.

7. The aphorism appears in his "Proverbs of Hell." Epistemological luddism is Langdon Winner's idea. See his excellent *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought* (MIT Press, 1978). I take up the question in *Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire & Its Enemies* (Autonomedia, 1998).

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/365-summer-2004/all-isms-are-wasms>
Fifth Estate #365, Summer, 2004

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