

# Swamp Fever (excerpts)

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FE note. Excerpts from “Swamp Fever, Primitivism & the ‘Ideological Vortex’: Farewell to All That” first published in the Fall 1997 issue of *Fifth Estate* (vol. 32 #2 (Whole Number 350)). End note.

Civilizations, most people know, destroy themselves. Radical greens, anarchist or otherwise, need to ... develop a constructive politics of solidarity, justice and renewal that moves beyond one-dimensional opposition to and unintelligible confrontation with mass society.

As I have argued in other contexts, the more extreme our ideas the more humble we should be about their application. We should recognize that no one is exactly clear about how mass society might be transformed into a weave of diverse, egalitarian, communal cultures. Certainly we must find ways to act, but a spiraling, instrumental militantism, becoming ever more frenetic and violent as it becomes more dogmatic and self-righteous, is a recipe for a suicidal spasm. Green Anarchists need to reexamine their ideas closely, and continually, not only in the light of theory but in the light of reality.

Perhaps the FE bears some blame for using the term “primitivist” at all in our desire to affirm and explore the meaning of aboriginal lifeways—an impulse which, with anthropologist Stanley Diamond, we believe to be 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.”

But to speak of the primitive does not require a political primitivism. The FE collective is not an organization or political “tendency”; our critical perspectives on civilization and technology, like our philosophical and ethical orientation in general, give us no qualitatively special insight into how to transform or dismantle mass society. Even Fredy Perlman—who is said to have provided a primitivist theoretical agenda in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*—insisted he was no “-ist” of any kind except a cellist. Those tempted to establish a political tendency with its myth of origins, canon, genealogy and pantheon of luminaries should keep in mind that Fredy’s last work was a novel, not a “theoretical agenda.”

Opposition to all mediations may in fact define the outlook of a certain current of primitivism. But mediations may also connect, not just separate. We may marvel at the story of Diogenes, who threw away his drinking cup when he saw a boy drinking from his cupped hands, but this provides only a useful intuition into our inevitably ambivalent mediations, not practical guidance for dismantling the technological system and renewing a convivial technics in the world we find ourselves inhabiting today. In any case, however atrocious the process, conquest and domination have always been syncretic, dialectically unfolding into resistance; hence vernacular, communal and liberatory visions and practices persist, scattered throughout civilization like moments of our past embedded in amber. We need to nurture them.

Such visions and practices are also, quite problematically, woven into the sinews of civilization itself. To “oppose” civilization as a totality—if one could be sure what that meant—could only imply somehow “opposing” not only the repressive and dehumanizing aspects of civilization but also the valuable and painful historical experience that has nurtured new insight—those hybrid flowers that have grown up between the cracks in the imperial monolith, and which we require in order to synthesize prehistory and post-modernity.

I once asked Fredy Perlman how he thought we could embrace extra-rational spiritual insights of native peoples without surrendering to religious obscurantism, since they are both rooted in a kind of non-objective, epistemological gnosis. He said that we could not avoid walking a tightrope between Enlightenment rationalism, with its materialist theories, and spirit. To fall too far into either extreme was to capitulate to a distorted single vision. It seems to me that we derive our greatest insight from the tension between them, practicing a skepticism that does not allow itself to become an ultimate act of dogma. Thus, our alternative notion of “progress” might be that we’ve inevitably learned some things along history’s way, things we didn’t necessarily need to know before, but which are probably indispensable to us now.

What is militant primitivism, after all, given GA’s apparent approval of various bizarre acts of social chaos and despair listed in their pages? Cheerleading apocalyptic collapse and violence evokes the Unabomber’s recommendation that revolutionaries must “work to heighten the social stresses within the system so as to increase the likelihood that it will break down,” a breakdown which would inevitably be “chaotic and involve much suffering.” “We have no illusions about the feasibility of creating a new, ideal form of society,” he writes. “Our goal is only to destroy the existing form of society.” This is like deep ecology catastrophism, which takes various manifestations of the disease for the remedy.

What we now most need is not a primitivist Weatherman faction with its instrumental fulcrum politics and militaristic glamorization of entropic violence, but an inclusive, non-sectarian, undogmatic, green anarchist movement capable of making its insights understood, and capable, as cartoon character Snappy Sammy Smoot once advised in the 1960s, of smashing the state while keeping a song in its heart and a smile on its lips.

If green anarchists hope to influence even conscious minorities already committed to social change, let alone the large majority necessary to make significant change, they are going to have to cultivate tolerance, humility, patience, an ability to speak reasonably to people with whom they disagree and to cooperate on common projects with them. Surely, those are not only key aspects of the tribal societies many of us admire, but the proverbial seeds of the society of the future. If we can’t do that, despite our conscious philosophy of mutual aid, egalitarianism and justice, do we really think most people in mass society, with its ideological commitment to competitive individualism, greed, amoral violence and authoritarian power, ever will?

It isn’t just living in a deteriorating rust belt city like Detroit that brought about our views; massive urban-industrial development outside of the city was as much an influence as the collapse within. At any rate, given that people share our views in many diverse places, one can’t seriously argue that these sensibilities are the product of our specific experience. Living in the late twentieth century under advanced capitalism’s holocaust against nature and the human spirit—under the shadow of bureaucratic mass murder, nuclear blackmail, industrial mass contamination, biospheric meltdown, technological regimentation and pervasive social decomposition and alienation should be sufficient. Our personal experience in Detroit only has tangential significance.

## **Primitive Means Original**

As a social phenomenon, primitivism has existed since antiquity, wherever empires smashed and conquered once self-reliant communities, and the empire’s inmates resisted, remembering and longing to reconstitute the original tribal circle (“primitive” means original). Like all movements of contestation and revolt, of course, these impulses and sensibilities have had an ambiguous character. Potentially radical or reactionary, revolutionary or conservative, dangerously capable of bringing about new empires, they are always in some way transgressive. (Let us remember that the most famous primitivist movement of late antiquity was christianity, a primitive communist movement. Eventually an increasingly hierarchicalized, orthodox church became an integral part of the reconstituted empire. Original primitive christian impulses continue to generate movements of both radical and reactionary significance after two millennia.)

It’s ludicrous to claim that the critique of civilization emerged internationally within the ultra-left milieu. Neither the Earth First! primitivist types who coined the slogan, “Back to the Stone Age!,” and with whom we debated deep ecology in the late 1980s, nor the primitivist hippy radical types in Earth First! and other radical environmental groups today came from the ultra-left. Nor have most people in the U.S. who are sympathetic to ideas that might

loosely be described as “primitivist.” Many found them in the American transcendentalist tradition, especially in our own taoist anarchist hermit, Henry David Thoreau, or in European romanticism’s protest against scientific objectivization of nature and industrialization, or in the bioregionalist vision of Mumford, the Buddhist economics of Schumaker, the satyagraha of Gandhi, the perennial wisdom of archaic and vernacular societies and literatures and plenty of other sources.

People who express values and ideas critical of industrialism and modern civilization usually started by directly witnessing industrial capitalist pillage of some favorite green place, and exposure through reading or travel to the lifeways and philosophies of native peoples, particularly American Indians. This is the vision to which Fredy Perlman turned when he abandoned the framework of the international left-communist current, no matter how much it influenced him.

Both fruitful insights and nonsense can be found in the primitivist impulse, but it isn’t always easy to distinguish healthy skepticism from repressive rationalism, crazy wisdom from self-delusion. That is for the whole society to work out in a spirit of open-minded tolerance. If rationalists are deluded in thinking that a hypothetical, authentic “progress” (rather than “real-existing” progress) validates their claims to ultimate historical rationality, self-proclaimed primitivists are at least as deluded in thinking they have a simple answer to the riddle of prehistory and history.

The fact that primitivist longings found expression as varied as Gandhian satyagraha and the fascist mystique, in movements both revolutionary and reactionary, should alert us to their psychic depth and intimate, ambivalent connection to the unfolding of human self-realization.

My opinions have not really changed, but I do not wish to belong to them. I have no interest in building bunkers on them. When people ask me, “Are you an anarchist?” I usually reply in a friendly tone, “Yes-unless you are.” Similarly, when I’m accused of being a communist, I often say, “Yes-a primitive communist.” One hopes the humor in both replies offers an opening for conversation, that is all. But that is all we can expect.

Taking such labels too seriously obscures the real work of renewing the social and ecological harmony lying latent in our own daily life. (Like opposition to civilization’s “totality,” by the way, self-righteous high-decibel neo-situationist fulminations against the entirety of daily life under capitalism forget that an enormous part of life is spent nurturing children, engaging in acts of mutual aid, trying to be understood or to understand what others are saying, cooperating in common projects and sometimes even subversive activities, etc.—a few examples of what I have elsewhere described as living both within and against mass society.)

Calling oneself a primitivist, or pretending that the origins of the authoritarian plague can be ultimately explained, helps little in this regard. The lessons of a primitivist sensibility come from the perennial (counter-) tradition, and thus are rewarding and offer deep insights, but they are nevertheless general enough, and too close to fundamental life intuitions, to yield any definitive practical answers to our problems, or even a theory (which is a manifestation of scientific rationality, not primal truths).

A sense of what is “minimally human” or essentially human) is among the most important values being lost in contemporary mass society. We cannot even say whether or not this loss has already reached a point of no return, but a reasoned reaffirmation of primitive and archaic lifeways and truths has the potential of aiding the “people without history” (as Eric Wolfe called western civilization’s victims) to find their way, regain their stolen inheritance, and thus lay the foundations for an authentically human present (and presence).

An authentic green movement should have room for anarchists, feminists, social and deep ecologists, anarcho-primitivists, left communists and eco-socialists, mystics and rationalists and many others, as long as they can keep in mind their common humanity and their common interests, and learn to act on them.

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