The Primitivist Critique of Civilization

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I. Prologue

Having been chosen--whether as devil's advocate or sacrificial lamb, I am not sure--to lead off this discussion on the question, "Was Civilization a Mistake?", I would like to offer some preliminary thoughts.

From the viewpoint of any non-civilized person, this consideration would appear to be steeped in irony. Here we are, after all, some of the most civilized people on the planet, discussing in the most civilized way imaginable whether civilization itself might be an error. Most of our fellow civilians would likely find our discussion, in addition to being ironic, also disturbing and pointless: after all, what person who has grown up with cars, electricity, and television would relish the idea of living without a house, and of surviving only on wild foods?

Nevertheless, despite the possibility that at least some of our remarks may be ironic, disturbing, and pointless, here we are. Why? I can only speak for myself. In my own intellectual development I have found that a critique of civilization is virtually inescapable for two reasons.

The first has to do with certain deeply disturbing trends in the modern world. We are, it seems, killing the planet. Revisionist "wise use" advocates tell us there is nothing to worry about; dangers to the environment, they say, have been wildly exaggerated. To me this is the most blatant form of wishful thinking. By most estimates, the oceans are dying, the human population is expanding far beyond the long-term carrying capacity of the land, the ozone layer is disappearing, and the global climate is showing worrisome signs of instability. Unless drastic steps are taken, in fifty years the vast majority of the world's population will likely be existing in conditions such that the lifestyle of virtually any undisturbed primitive tribe would be paradise by comparison.

Now, it can be argued that civilization per se is not at fault, that the problems we face have to do with unique economic and historical circumstances. But we should at least consider the possibility that our modern industrial system represents the flowering of tendencies that go back quite far. This, at any rate, is the implication of recent assessments of the ecological ruin left in the wake of the Roman, Mesopotamian, Chinese, and other prior civilizations. Are we perhaps repeating their errors on a gargantuan scale?

If my first reason for criticizing civilization has to do with its effects on the environment, the second has to do with its impact on human beings. As civilized people, we are also domesticated. We are to primitive peoples as cows and sheep are to bears and eagles. On the rental property where I live in California my landlord keeps two white domesticated ducks. These ducks have been bred to have wings so small as to prevent them from flying. This is a convenience for their keepers, but compared to wild ducks these are pitiful creatures.

Many primal peoples tend to view us as pitiful creatures, too--though powerful and dangerous because of our technology and sheer numbers. They regard civilization as a sort of social disease. We civilized people appear to act as though we were addicted to a powerful drug--a drug that comes in the forms of money,

factory-made goods, oil, and electricity. We are helpless without this drug, so we have come to see any threat to its supply as a threat to our very existence. Therefore we are easily manipulated--by desire (for more) or fear (that what we have will be taken away)--and powerful commercial and political interests have learned to orchestrate our desires and fears in order to achieve their own purposes of profit and control. If told that the production of our drug involves slavery, stealing, and murder, or the ecological equivalents, we try to ignore the news so as not to have to face an intolerable double bind.

Since our present civilization is patently ecologically unsustainable in its present form, it follows that our descendants will be living very differently in a few decades, whether their new way of life arises by conscious choice or by default. If humankind is to choose its path deliberately, I believe that our deliberations should include a critique of civilization itself, such as we are undertaking here. The question implicit in such a critique is, What have we done poorly or thoughtlessly in the past that we can do better now? It is in this constructive spirit that I offer the comments that follow.

II. Civilization and Primitivism

What Is Primitivism?

The image of a lost Golden Age of freedom and innocence is at the heart of all the world's religions, is one of the most powerful themes in the history of human thought, and is the earliest and most characteristic expression of primitivism--the perennial belief in the necessity of a return to origins.

As a philosophical idea, primitivism has had as its proponents Lao Tze, Rousseau, and Thoreau, as well as most of the pre-Socratics, the medieval Jewish and Christian theologians, and 19th- and 20th-century anarchist social theorists, all of whom argued (on different bases and in different ways) the superiority of a simple life close to nature. More recently, many anthropologists have expressed admiration for the spiritual and material advantages of the ways of life of the world's most "primitive" societies--the surviving gathering-and-hunting peoples who now make up less than one hundredth of one percent of the world's population.

Meanwhile, as civilization approaches a crisis precipitated by overpopulation and the destruction of the ecological integrity of the planet, primitivism has enjoyed a popular resurgence, by way of increasing interest in shamanism, tribal customs, herbalism, radical environmentalism, and natural foods. There is a widespread (though by no means universally shared) sentiment that civilization has gone too far in its domination of nature, and that in order to survive--or, at least, to live with satisfaction--we must regain some of the spontaneity and naturalness of our early ancestors.

What Is Civilization?

There are many possible definitions of the word civilization. Its derivation--from civis, "town" or "city"--suggests that a minimum definition would be, "urban culture." Civilization also seems to imply writing, division of labor, agriculture, organized warfare, growth of population, and social stratification.

Yet the latest evidence calls into question the idea that these traits always go together. For example, Elizabeth Stone and Paul Zimansky's assessment of power relations in the Mesopotamian city of Maskan-shapir (published in the April 1995 Scientific American) suggests that urban culture need not imply class divisions. Their findings seem to show that civilization in its earliest phase was free of these. Still, for the most part the history of civilization in the Near East, the Far East, and Central America, is also the history of kingship, slavery, conquest, agriculture, overpopulation, and environmental ruin. And these traits continue in

civilization's most recent phases--the industrial state and the global market--though now the state itself takes the place of the king, and slavery becomes wage labor and de facto colonialism administered through multinational corporations. Meanwhile, the mechanization of production (which began with agriculture) is overtaking nearly every avenue of human creativity, population is skyrocketing, and organized warfare is resulting in unprecedented levels of bloodshed.

Perhaps, if some of these undesirable traits were absent from the very first cities, I should focus my critique on "Empire Culture" instead of the broader target of "civilization." However, given how little we still know about the earliest urban centers of the Neolithic era, it is difficult as yet to draw a clear distinction between the two terms.

III. Primitivism Versus Civilization

Wild Self/Domesticated Self

People are shaped from birth by their cultural surroundings and by their interactions with the people closest to them. Civilization manipulates these primary relationships in such a way as to domesticate the infant--that is, so as to accustom it to life in a social structure one step removed from nature. The actual process of domestication is describable as follows, using terms borrowed from the object-relations school of psychology.

The infant lives entirely in the present moment in a state of pure trust and guilelessness, deeply bonded with her mother. But as she grows, she discovers that her mother is a separate entity with her own priorities and limits. The infant's experience of relationship changes from one of spontaneous trust to one that is suffused with need and longing. This creates a gap between Self and Other in the consciousness of the child, who tries to fill this deepening rift with transitional objects--initially, perhaps a teddy bear; later, addictions and beliefs that serve to fill the psychic gap and thus provide a sense of security. It is the powerful human need for transitional objects that drives individuals in their search for property and power, and that generates bureaucracies and technologies as people pool their efforts.

This process does not occur in the same way in the case of primitive childbearing, where the infant is treated with indulgence, is in constant physical contact with a caregiver throughout infancy, and later undergoes rites of passage. In primal cultures the need for transitional objects appears to be minimized. Anthropological and psychological research converge to suggest that many of civilized people's emotional ills come from our culture's abandonment of natural childrearing methods and initiatory rites and its systematic substitution of alienating pedagogical practices from crib through university.

Health: Natural or Artificial?

In terms of health and quality of life, civilization has been a mitigated disaster. S. Boyd Eaton, M.D., et al., argued in The Paleolithic Prescription (1988) that pre agricultural peoples enjoyed a generally healthy way of life, and that cancer, heart disease, strokes, diabetes, emphysema, hypertension, and cirrhosis--which together lead to 75 percent of all mortality in industrialized nations--are caused by our civilized lifestyles. In terms of diet and exercise, preagricultural lifestyles showed a clear superiority to those of agricultural and civilized peoples.

Much-vaunted increases in longevity in civilized populations have resulted not so much from wonder drugs, as merely from better sanitation--a corrective for conditions created by the overcrowding of cities; and from reductions in infant mortality. It is true that many lives have been spared by modern antibiotics. Yet

antibiotics also appear responsible for the evolution of resistant strains of microbes, which health officials now fear could produce unprecedented epidemics in the next century.

The ancient practice of herbalism, evidence of which dates back at least 60,000 years, is practiced in instinctive fashion by all higher animals. Herbal knowledge formed the basis of modern medicine and remains in many ways superior to it. In countless instances, modern synthetic drugs have replaced herbs not because they are more effective or safer, but because they are more profitable to manufacture.

Other forms of "natural" healing--massage, the "placebo effect," the use of meditation and visualization--are also being shown effective. Medical doctors Bernie Siegel and Deepak Chopra are critical of mechanized medicine and say that the future of the healing professions lies in the direction of attitudinal and natural therapies.

Spirituality: Raw or Cooked?

Spirituality means different things to different people--humility before a higher power or powers; compassion for the suffering of others; obedience to a lineage or tradition; a felt connection with the Earth or with Nature; evolution toward "higher" states of consciousness; or the mystical experience of oneness with all life or with God. With regard to each of these fundamental ways of defining or experiencing the sacred, spontaneous spirituality seems to become regimented, dogmatized, even militarized, with the growth of civilization. While some of the founders of world religions were intuitive primitivists (Jesus, Lao Tze, the Buddha), their followers have often fostered the growth of dominance hierarchies.

The picture is not always simple, though. The thoroughly civilized Roman Catholic Church produced two of the West's great primitivists--St. Francis and St. Clair; while the neo-shamanic, vegetarian, and herbalist movements of early 20th century Germany attracted arch-authoritarians Heinrich Himmler and Adolph Hitler. Of course, Nazism's militarism and rigid dominator organization were completely alien to primitive life, while St. Francis's and St. Clair's voluntary poverty and treatment of animals as sacred were reminiscent of the lifestyle and worldview of most gathering-and-hunting peoples. If Nazism was atavistic, it was only highly selectively so.

A consideration of these historical ironies is useful in helping us isolate the essentials of true primitivist spirituality--which include spontaneity, mutual aid, encouragement of natural diversity, love of nature, and compassion for others. As spiritual teachers have always insisted, it is the spirit (or state of consciousness) that is important, not the form (names, ideologies, and techniques). While from the standpoint of Teilhard de Chardin's idea of spiritual evolutionism, primitivist spirituality may initially appear anti-evolutionary or regressive, the essentials we have cited are timeless and trans-evolutionary--they are available at all stages, at all times, for all people. It is when we cease to see civilization in terms of theories of cultural evolution and see it merely as one of several possible forms of social organization that we begin to understand why religion can be liberating, enlightening, and empowering when it holds consistently to primitivist ideals; or deadening and oppressive when it is co-opted to serve the interests of power.

Economics: Free or Unaffordable?

At its base, economics is about how people relate with the land and with one another in the process of fulfilling their material wants and needs. In the most primitive societies, these relations are direct and straightforward. Land, shelter, and food are free. Everything is shared, there are no rich people or poor

people, and happiness has little to do with accumulating material possessions. The primitive lives in relative abundance (all needs and wants are easily met) and has plenty of leisure time.

Civilization, in contrast, straddles two economic pillars--technological innovation and the marketplace. "Technology" here includes everything from the plow to the nuclear reactor-¬all are means to more efficiently extract energy and resources from nature. But efficiency implies the reification of time, and so civilization always brings with it a preoccupation with past and future; eventually the present moment nearly vanishes from view. The elevation of efficiency over other human values is epitomized in the factory--the automated workplace--in which the worker becomes merely an appendage of the machine, a slave to clocks and wages.

The market is civilization's means of equating dissimilar things through a medium of exchange. As we grow accustomed to valuing everything according to money, we tend to lose a sense of the uniqueness of things. What, after all, is an animal worth, or a mountain, or a redwood tree, or an hour of human life? The market gives us a numerical answer based on scarcity and demand. To the degree that we believe that such values have meaning, we live in a world that is desacralized and desensitized, without heart or spirit.

We can get some idea of ways out of our ecologically ruinous, humanly deadening economic cage by examining not only primitive lifestyles, but the proposals of economist E. F. Schumacher, the experiences of people in utopian communities in which technology and money are marginalized, and the lives of individuals who have adopted an attitude of voluntary simplicity.

Government: Bottom Up or Top Down?

In the most primitive human societies there are no leaders, bosses, politics, laws, crime, or taxes. There is often little division of labor between women and men, and where such division exists both gender's contributions are often valued more or less equally. Probably as a result, many foraging peoples are relatively peaceful (anthropologist Richard Lee found that "the !Kung [Bushmen of southern Africa] hate fighting, and think anybody who fought would be stupid").

With agriculture usually come division of labor, increased sexual inequality, and the beginnings of social hierarchy. Priests, kings, and organized, impersonal warfare all seem to come together in one package. Eventually, laws and borders define the creation of the fully fledged state. The state as a focus of coercion and violence has reached its culmination in the 19th and 20th centuries in colonialism, fascism, and Stalinism. Even the democratic industrial state functions essentially as an instrument of multinational corporate-style colonial oppression and domestic enslavement, its citizens merely being given the choice between selected professional bureaucrats representing political parties with slightly varying agendas for the advancement of corporate power.

Beginning with William Godwin in the early 19th century, anarchist social philosophers have offered a critical counterpoint to the increasingly radical statism of most of the world's civilized political leaders. The core idea of anarchism is that human beings are fundamentally sociable; left to themselves, they tend to cooperate to their mutual benefit. There will always be exceptions, but these are best dealt with informally and on an individual basis. Many anarchists cite the Athenian polis, the "sections" in Paris during the French Revolution, the New England town meetings of the 18th century, the popular assemblies in Barcelona in the late 1930s, and the Paris general strike of 1968 as positive examples of anarchy in action. They point to the

possibility of a kind of social ecology, in which diversity and spontaneity are permitted to flourish unhindered both in human affairs and in Nature.

While critics continue to describe anarchism as a practical failure, organizational and systems theorists Tom Peters and Peter Senge are advocating the transformation of hierarchical, bureaucratized organizations into more decentralized, autonomous, spontaneous ones. This transformation is presently underway in--of all places--the very multinational corporations that form the backbone of industrial civilization.

Civilization and Nature

Civilized people are accustomed to an anthropocentric view of the world. Our interest in the environment is utilitarian: it is of value because it is of use (or potential use) to human beings--if only as a place for camping and recreation.

Primitive peoples, in contrast, tended to see nature as intrinsically meaningful. In many cultures prohibitions surrounded the overhunting of animals or the felling of trees. The aboriginal peoples of Australia believed that their primary purpose in the cosmic scheme of things was to take care of the land, which meant performing ceremonies for the periodic renewal of plant and animal species, and of the landscape itself.

The difference in effects between the anthropocentric and ecocentric worldviews is incalculable. At present, we human beings--while considering ourselves the most intelligent species on the planet--are engaged in the most unintelligent enterprise imaginable: the destruction of our own natural life-support system. We need here only mention matters such as the standard treatment of factory-farmed domesticated food animals, the destruction of soils, the pollution of air and water, and the extinctions of wild species, as these horrors are well documented. It seems unlikely that these could ever have arisen but for an entrenched and ever-deepening trend of thinking that separates humanity from its natural context and denies inherent worth to non-human nature.

The origin and growth of this tendency to treat nature as an object separate from ourselves can be traced to the Neolithic revolution, and through the various stages of civilization's intensification and growth. One can also trace the countercurrent to this tendency from the primitivism of the early Taoists to that of today's deep ecologists, ecofeminists, and bioregionalists.

How We Compensate for Our Loss of Nature

How do we make up for the loss of our primitive way of life? Psychotherapy, exercise and diet programs, the vacation and entertainment industries, and social welfare programs are necessitated by civilized, industrial lifestyles. The cumulative cost of these compensatory efforts is vast; yet in many respects they are only palliative.

The medical community now tells us that our modern diet of low-fiber, high-fat processed foods is disastrous to our health. But what exactly is the cost--in terms of hospital stays, surgeries, premature deaths, etc.? A rough but conservative estimate runs into the tens of billions of dollars per year in North America alone.

At the forefront of the "wellness" movement are advocates of natural foods, exercise programs (including hiking and backpacking), herbalism, and other therapies that aim specifically to bring overcivilized individuals back in touch with the innate source of health within their own stressed and repressed bodies.

Current approaches in psychology aim to retrieve lost portions of the primitive psyche via "inner child" work, through which adults compensate for alienated childhoods; or men's and women's vision quests, through which civilized people seek to access the "wild man" or "wild woman" within.

All of these physically, psychologically, and even spiritually-oriented efforts are helpful antidotes for the distress of civilization. One must wonder, however, whether it wouldn't be better simply to stop creating the problems that these programs and therapies are intended to correct.

IV. Questions and Objections

Isn't civilization simply the inevitable expression of the evolutionary urge as it is translated through human society? Isn't primitivism therefore regressive?

We are accustomed to thinking of the history of Western civilization as an inevitable evolutionary progression. But this implies that all the world's peoples who didn't spontaneously develop civilizations of their own were less highly evolved than ourselves, or simply "backward." Not all anthropologists who have spent time with such peoples think this way. Indeed, according to the cultural materialist school of thought, articulated primarily by Marvin Harris, social change in the direction of technological innovation and social stratification is fueled not so much by some innate evolutionary urge as by crises brought on by overpopulation and resource exhaustion.

Wasn't primitive life terrible? Would we really want to go back to hunting and gathering, living without modern comforts and conveniences?

Putting an urban person in the wilderness without comforts and conveniences would be as cruel as abandoning a domesticated pet by the roadside. Even if the animal survived, it would be miserable. And we would probably be miserable too, if the accouterments of civilization were abruptly withdrawn from us. Yet the wild cousins of our hypothetical companion animal--whether a parrot, a canine, or a feline--live quite happily away from houses and packaged pet food and resist our efforts to capture and domesticate them, just as primitive peoples live quite happily without civilization and often resist its imposition. Clearly, animals (including people) can adapt either to wild or domesticated ways of life over the course of several generations, while adult individuals tend to be much less adaptable. In the view of many of its proponents, primitivism implies a direction of social change over time, as opposed to an instantaneous, all-or-nothing choice. We in the industrial world have gradually accustomed ourselves to a way of life that appears to be leading toward a universal biological holocaust. The question is, shall we choose to gradually accustom ourselves to another way of life--one that more successfully integrates human purposes with ecological imperatives--or shall we cling to our present choices to the bitter end?

Obviously, we cannot turn back the clock. But we are at a point in history where we not only can, but must pick and choose among all the present and past elements of human culture to find those that are most humane and sustainable. While the new culture we will create by doing so will not likely represent simply an immediate return to wild food gathering, it could restore much of the freedom, naturalness, and spontaneity that we have traded for civilization's artifices, and it could include new versions of cultural forms with roots in humanity's remotest past. We need not slavishly imitate the past; we might, rather, be inspired by the best examples of human adaptation, past and present. Instead of "going back," we should think of this process as "getting back on track."

Haven't we gained important knowledge and abilities through civilization? Wouldn't renouncing these advances be stupid and short-sighted?

If human beings are inherently mostly good, sociable, and creative, it is inevitable that much of what we have done in the course of the development of civilization should be worth keeping, even if the enterprise as a whole was skewed. But how do we decide what to keep? Obviously, we must agree upon criteria. I would suggest that our first criterion must be ecological sustainability. What activities can be pursued across many generations with minimal environmental damage? A second criterion might be, What sorts of activities promote--rather than degrade--human dignity and freedom?

If human beings are inherently good, then why did we make the "mistake" of creating civilization? Aren't the two propositions (human beings are good, civilization is bad) contradictory?

Only if taken as absolutes. Human nature is malleable, its qualities changing somewhat according to the natural and social environment. Moreover, humankind is not a closed system. We exist within a natural world that is, on the whole, "good," but that is subject to rare catastrophes. Perhaps the initial phases of civilization were humanity's traumatized response to overwhelming global cataclysms accompanying and following the end of the Pleistocene. Kingship and warfare may have originated as survival strategies. Then, perhaps civilization itself became a mechanism for re-traumatizing each new generation, thus preserving and regenerating its own psycho-social basis.

What practical suggestions for the future stem from primitivism? We cannot all revert to gathering and hunting today because there are just too many of us. Can primitivism offer a practical design for living?

No philosophy or "-ism" is a magical formula for the solution of all human problems. Primitivism doesn't offer easy answers, but it does suggest an alternative direction or set of values. For many centuries, civilization has been traveling in the direction of artificiality, control, and domination. Primitivism tells us that there is an inherent limit to our continued movement in that direction, and that at some point we must begin to choose to readapt ourselves to nature. The point of a primitivist critique of civilization is not necessarily to insist on an absolute rejection of every aspect of modern life, but to assist in clarifying issues so that we can better understand the tradeoffs we are making now, deepen the process of renegotiating our personal bargains with nature, and thereby contribute to the reframing of our society's collective covenants.

V. Some Concluding Thoughts

In any discussion of primitivism we must keep in mind civilization's "good" face--the one characterized (in Lewis Mumford's words) by

- the invention and keeping of the written record, the growth of visual and musical arts,
- the effort to widen the circle of communication and economic intercourse far beyond
- the range of any local community: ultimately the purpose to make available to all
- [people] the discoveries and inventions and creations, the works of art and thought,
- the values and purposes that any single group has discovered.

Civilization brings not only comforts, but also the opportunity to think the thoughts of Plato or Thoreau, to travel to distant places, and to live under the protection of a legal system that guarantees certain rights. How could we deny the worth of these things?

Naturally, we would like to have it all; we would like to preserve civilization's perceived benefits while restraining its destructiveness. But we haven't found a way to do that yet. And it is unlikely that we will while we are in denial about what we have left behind, and about the likely consequences of what we are doing now.

While I advocate taking a critical look at civilization, I am not suggesting that we are now in position to render a final judgment on it. It is entirely possible that we are standing on the threshold of a cultural transformation toward a way of life characterized by relatively higher degrees of contentment, creativity, justice, and sustainability than have been known in any human society heretofore. If we are able to follow this transformation through, and if we call the result "civilization," then we will surely be entitled to declare civilization a resounding success.