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# To The Captives

Kevin Tucker

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To the Captives:  
A Declaration of War and Words

No one, it is said, can go back to the Pleistocene. We will not, in some magic time warp that denies duration, join those prehistoric dead in their well-honed ecology. But that is irrelevant. Having never left our genome and its authority, we have never left the past, which is part of ourselves, and have only to bring the Pleistocene to us. — Paul Shepard, *Traces of an Omnivore*<sup>1</sup>

Semantics can be painful, but sometimes a little goes a long way. For nearly the past two decades, I have loudly called myself an anarcho-primitivist. I've found both grounding and a place within anarcho-primitivism. It's helped define a place to learn and fight from. But, like all things, it's important to realize limitations as well. Is this new ground, or are we still on enemy turf?

As one of anarcho-primitivism's primary proponents, it's a fairly comfortable backdrop for me to offer as shorthand: that there's more to what I'm saying than what is in any one essay or talk. Anarcho-primitivism is my context. But there are a number of drawbacks that continually come up. So let me say this clearly: I am an anarcho-primitivist. I have no issue with what we have built up and continue to build upon. I will always be an anarcho-primitivist.

The problem isn't the critique. The problem, to the extent there is one, is in the name and its framing: anarcho-primitivism.

This is a conversation that has been growing for a while. John Zerzan and I have privately and publicly discussed the relationship of anarcho-primitivism to anarchism more widely. It's been a part of internal discussions among *Wild Resistance* editors, as well as others. It's felt increasingly apparent that the name is a limitation, attaching itself to two different lineages—anarchism

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Shepard, *Traces of an Omnivore*. Washington DC: Shearwater, 1996.

and primitivism—neither of which is necessarily fitting in its own right. Anarcho-primitivism becomes the square peg, tethered to sets of rules that are neither applicable nor useful.

I've increasingly used another phrase: *primal anarchy*. As both anarchism and primitivism seem to quickly wither and decay on their own, I'm only finding more reasons to embrace that term entirely.

We are all stuck in a strange predicament.

Until the past 10,000 years or so of our history, little about the world drastically changed until civilization began to alter it. Since the technology capable of disrupting the feedback loops of a wild world arose. Since the organization of labor fostered the domestication of plants and animals, turning the communal spaces into churches, and the introduction of draft animals only for them to become replaced by the combine, there has been a massive disruption to the way that we, as social animals, have engaged the world. Whatever we throw at it, however we dam and damn it, this is the very same earth that fostered our evolution, our development. It allowed us to thrive. And we thrived within it.

In return, we subjugate and assault it.

We develop technologies to become more efficient at that assault. We continually become more proficient in our attempts to suffocate the world that we remain a part of.

All of this comes in stages and steps. In great leaps forward. In wars and peace. From the vantage point of the supposed victor, the self-appointed hero records a trajectory. Our rise. Our history.

At every step, we award ourselves the ingenuity of conquest. We document it. Our achievements. Our first boom, our last burst. It's all in there, we wear our colonial past and present in globally sourced and produced articles of clothing, bought and sold on a world market through machines and shanty factories. It's at our table. It's the beds we seek solace in at night. Buried in plain sight, the lineage of civilization lies before us.

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On that playing field, anarchists lose. We will never defeat the State or civilization on its own terms or within its own limitations.

Primal anarchy shows us another world. The world domestication preys upon and prays against. It is here. It is within and around us. Not another time. Not another place. Like the world that shaped it, it is dynamic, resilient, and resolute.

It is us.

I see no reason why we should continue to see ourselves any other way.

from Wild Resistance no 6 (winter 2019)

If you dig, it falls apart. It becomes increasingly apparent. It becomes impossible to escape.

It is the predicament of our world, that it is easier to explain that past, to expand our present back and then into the future, both far and wide, than it is to understand the answer to the simplest of questions: why? Why do we go to work? Why do we consume? Why do we defend our abuser?

Why do we seek to salvage the corpse of a system that brings more misery than joy?

One that brings more content than grounding? More fiber optic cables than connections?

Those questions are like plagues: why do we continue to play along and take part in a system that ultimately could destroy us and our home? Why are we more comfortable with catastrophic annihilation than the minor discomforts that a machine-free world might bring?

There is a foundation to this world; infrastructure, economic systems, systemic distancing and oppression, individual trauma and collective dispossession are all at its core. When you chart the history of civilization, all of those things come to the front. But they are drivers. As social animals, we need more than that. We need a story. We need a reason or a justification for why we do what we do.

Narratives don't conquer, but narratives enlist troops, miners, loggers, and missionaries. In limiting our perception of the world, a solid story is sales pitch for a life that we didn't ask for and a sacrifice we didn't seek to make. Narratives shape the questions we ask and the answers we are willing to hear in return.

As the world becomes both more literate and literal, both the stories we tell and the terms we use continue to gain more and more power. They become our baseline. They set the parameters.

The words we use, the frameworks we exist within, matter. They flatten the world and our interactions with it. They keep us looking

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anywhere but down to the earth where grounding is possible. Keep on dreaming, keep on working.

It's not satisfying to say, but to condense the questions above into one: why do we actively take part in perpetuating a way of existence that is unfulfilling and omniscidal? It's because we've stopped seeing it as an option. Our training pays off and we no longer see it as a choice. We no longer see that the entire trajectory we are on has more bodies behind it than futures ahead.

The words matter because this world matters.

If you feel no more satisfied than I do with this, then we better start finding ways of telling a new story. And it helps to know that older stories are still here. Buried close to the surface hastily by conquistadors and developers, they're tied to the earth we've been led to believe has long since been subjugated. Conquered. Repopulated. Repurposed.

We are led to believe that we arrived here by choice. That we are free, acting on free will.

That we are anything but captives.

Everything we interact with seeks to reinforce that perception, but it is a veneer. A house of cards. A palace of glass and mirrors. Within it, we have rocks and we have Molotovs at our disposal, but it helps to know what we're up against. And to do so, we have to be able to see it more clearly. Choose our words cautiously, so we can react fiercely. We can once again become grounded in the world that exists, rather than remain stuck with the divided, mapped, and claimed reality that we were born into.

We have the chance to realize that we were never really gone in the first place.

In finally parting with "primitive," we recognize what anarcho-primitivism has always told us: time is a historic creation, one intent on universalizing our displacement from the wild world, to justify our decimation of the earth, to see our wild and less-domesticated relatives as less-than-human, and to leave the relics of our ancestry to history in our trail-blazing path to our destined future.

Time gives us a story, a narrative. It gives us a place within the timeline so that we don't look around and wonder how domesticated plants and animals might have changed anything about who we are as individuals, as societies.

*Primal* is not an indicator of who we were, but who we are. It animates the past that history tames in death and conquest. It diminishes our ability to isolate the present from the future. It sees life as a continuum. In upholding primal anarchy, we aren't denying the anarcho-primitivist critique of civilization, but actualizing it. We are no longer anarchists wishing to live in anarchy, but the embodiment of a resistant primal anarchy. One that is capable of biting back.

We are agents, not spectators.

Our lineage doesn't end with the origins of domestication, but is the ever-present past of refusals and uprisings that have fought and continue to fight domesticators in all their forms. Colonizers win more often because they have the numbers and the technology, cannon fodder to continue throwing in trenches. Defeat comes with force and subjugation, not in ceding to the narratives of those with power.

Most resistance movements since have failed because of their inability to articulate targets. Like revolutionaries, the ideal dictates that you seize the means of production and the reproduction of power. It feeds off of a visceral and immediate rage, biting directly at the closest outpost of control. We have been in the unique position where hindsight is buried in plain sight. It is expected that we won't act on our rage, or at least not in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways.

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Pg 220.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Lorraine Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1989. Pg 96.

is continually repressed through rituals of domination in our own lives. It is demonstrable because it isn't a historic event or ideal, but an ongoing process.

Like Konner makes clear above, we aren't the first to notice either. Anthropologist Tim Ingold writes:

*The advent of domestication, in both senses, had to await the breakthrough that liberated humanity from the shackles of nature, a breakthrough that was marked equally by the emergence of institutions of law and government, serving to shackle human nature to a social order.*<sup>14</sup>

In separating us from a living world, domestication hijacks our nature and obscures it by intertwining our needs with that of the machine. Human nature is never gone; it is simply re-purposed by civilization.

That is why we speak of *re-wilding*. The wild is implicit. Wildness is what we are removed from. Along the same lines, Ingold distinguishes enskilling from enculturation. Enskilling can "only take on meaning in the context of... engagement with the environment."<sup>15</sup> Our ecology and biology are tied to the context of a wild world. The same one we evolved within and amongst.

That is our context. This is a context where anarchy isn't the ideal, but the default.

If we're willing to excuse the imperfect language, we aren't alone here either. Anthropologist Stanley Diamond was clear on the matter:

*The longing for a primitive mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although different form) is a precondition for our survival.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*. London: Routledge, 2000. Pg 64.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pg 37.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive*. Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987. Pg 207.

## Anarchism versus Anarchy

The only -ist name I respond to is "cellist." -Fredy Perlman<sup>2</sup>

Let's start with anarchism.

Anarchy is a relatively simple term. From the Greek, *An-* and *-arkhos*: without a chief or ruler. It's proscriptive and open to interpretation pretty widely. The various sects of anarchism split over a central question: what constitutes government? What constitutes social control? At the very least, anarchists all agree that government is an impediment to freedom.

Ultimately, that isn't necessarily saying a lot.

The problem is that anarchism is largely reactive in nature. It's left focusing most often on what *a particular society* might look like without government, when there is a focus at all. In a sense, that's not a bad starting point, but it is limiting.

For anarcho-primitivists, simply being against government has never been enough. The subjugation implicit in social power presses beyond humans. The war against the wild started long before the first smokestack ever went up. Industrial strength domination just sped up the process and efficiency of draining the earth to fuel itself. This is a realization shared widely amongst all green anarchists.

Among green or eco-anarchists, it was no longer just about the State, but state-level societies: civilization itself.<sup>3</sup> Bio-centrism took a central role, but even anti-civilization anarchism has taken on a life of its own, having its nihilist and egoist sides being against "wildness" and "nature," alongside civilization. It's not uncommon for those particular anti-civilization anarchists to call themselves "green anarchists," but the "green" aspect is merely incidental.

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<sup>3</sup> This wasn't always the case, "green State" social ecologists used to be under the umbrella of "green anarchism," but that seemed to have definitively faded by the time the *Green Anarchy* editorial collective added "anti-civilization" to its masthead (no 9, summer 2002).

It is anarcho-primitivism that has driven green anarchism. And this continues to be the case. Anarcho-primitivism is concerned, first and foremost, with not just opposing civilization, but in digging up its roots. While other sects of anarchism have sought to oppose or theorize about what functional anarchist societies might look like, anarcho-primitivists dug into history, ecology, anthropology, and our experiences and actually found them: nomadic hunter-gatherers. Those that have lived a mobile life, hunting, foraging, and scavenging, refusing to store foods; here we have it, anarchy in action.

This isn't the anarchy that most anarchists have dreamt up. Mostly you hear about modern communes, communal living situations, or cooperative ventures. Short-lived stuff, but always stuck on being relatively compatible with a modern, civilized life. Romantic, revolutionary anarchists can be indiscernible from their socialist affiliates on the Left and their libertarian affiliates on the Right. "All the movements of the left and right," wrote Jacques Camatte in 1973, "are functionally the same inasmuch as they all participate in a larger, more general movement towards the destruction of the human species."<sup>4</sup> In their view, anarchism is an ideal. One worth fighting for, but mostly one that will be proven true after the Revolution is won.

And herein lies a central conflict: ideals are meaningless.

Those instances of "anarchy" are unstable, fallible beasts. When they fail, as they always have and will, it will be said that it was because they weren't enacted properly. Or the individuals faltered. Anything other than being a flawed dream of industrial and post-industrial philosophers and activists, dead set on tackling only the oppression most directly in front of them.

What the anarcho-primitivist critique came down to is something that one of anarchism's founding voices, Kropotkin, also

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Camatte, *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays*. New York: Autonomedia, 1995. Pg 95.

Human nature, here, is to solidify power: it becomes the idealized group, a more naturalized—yet more potent—form of xenophobic nationalism.

That's awful, truly it is, but it is contextual.

What we're talking about when we say human nature is that there is an ecological, biological, and psychological imperative to the way that our bodies move, thirst, and react. The only way that this is threatening is if those implications could undo the fragile socio-economic order that has been created. Because fascists on all sides have used the ideal across the political spectrum doesn't negate the simple biological reality that social animals have specific needs. If we neglect to focus on that, then we are left only with ideals about where power comes from and where it goes.

When we seek to undermine and bring down the very means that make social and economic power possible, it's pretty hard to see how gulags and trenches can come of it. Our goal isn't to weaponize the notion of human nature to prop up ideologies and States, but to expose the ways that domesticators hide it to turn us into subjects.

It's hard for me to soft-peddle this concept, because I don't think this approach is really that unique. Nearly every group that has a critique or praxis has some degree of human nature in mind, primal anarchy has only chosen to articulate it and that's because it is demonstrable. In a word, it's anti-idealist.

For the anarchist, the very minimum of definitions for "anarchy" implies a refusal of the legitimacy of State power and control. States say that we need them. What anarchists say is that we don't. Well, why? It's simple to point to primal anarchy as an example. But to say human nature doesn't exist, yet that a society without law won't be overwhelmed by chaos and violence is harder to ground. It all comes from somewhere.

We all have our wants. We all have our wishes. It's not liberating to say that they don't exist nor that they don't color our sense of urgency for action, it's disingenuous. Primal anarchy puts it up front. It identifies what it is, how it is suppressed historically, and how it



scape, that they must either be rid of or contextualized. That's why Ishi, the last of the Yahi of California, died on display in a museum. He became a living relic of times past. After his death, his body was torn apart to become a literal relic.

What we are left with is a sanitized variation of reality. Just beneath the surface of skulls and cultural artifacts in museums is the radical realization that there's much more to the life of "cavemen" and that the egalitarian, primal anarchy they lived in is what our bodies and minds are comprised of. It's a pretty shallow grave, but it's still an effective one.

So the question remains, if a relatively mainstream wave can come to accept primal anarchy as our nature, even if left unarticulated, then why has this been such a contentious issue for anarchists and such a missed basis for primitivists?

We come back to ideals.

For primitivists, the nostalgia needs little reference point. Having succumbed to time, primitivists accept defeat to civilization, hoping to revitalize the past in some form rather than to liberate the present.

For many anarchists, however, human nature is terrifying. That's because, like anarchism, it remains an ideal. The more ideological of anarchists, as romantic as the less-articulate primitivists, don't have a problem with human nature in and of itself, they just see it as something to be actualized in the future, after the Revolution.

For the rest, human nature is dangerous because it can be weaponized. In all fairness, that's not the worst reason to avoid the term. Human nature, as used by nearly every nationalist, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary movement, has always been about exclusion. It is about defining who is or is not a human worthy of rights and inclusion in a society. At best, it becomes the subject of campaigns for civil equality, but, more often, it has filled gulags and graves.

If you want people to do horrible things, make them feel isolated, then give them a group and make them feel threatened or attacked.

saw: hunter-gatherers live in a state of anarchy.<sup>5</sup> He was overly optimistic in pulling that thread, rightfully seeing that anarchy hadn't been fully suppressed by horticultural societies, but then mistaking currents of *anarchy-as-resistance* with the potential for *anarchism-as-ideal* to continue existing in the fields, factories, and workshops. The path for anarchy diverged from reality to ideal.

Anarcho-primitivism, however, found it again.

Social control was no longer just the object of States, but made possible by domestication. Our baseline as a species became more apparent: 99.999% of our time on Earth was shaped by and for life as nomadic hunter-gatherer-scavengers. The most egalitarian societies ever to have existed—where social power in all its forms (patriarchy, tribe-based, and otherwise) were not only absent, but also impossible—function not because of planning, but because of practices.

Unlike ideals, there was no need for perfection. There's nothing innately better about individuals in a hunter-gatherer society, their societies work because they remove all the premises of domesticated life. When you remove production, you remove the need for exclusive rights and access. When everyone is capable and a participant in acquiring food (rather than producing it), there's nothing to wield over others or coerce with. When tensions rise, you can just walk away.

This is primal anarchy: a holistically functioning, resilient, and egalitarian society that is innately and ecologically sane. The anthropologist Peter Gardner has called it "pure anarchy."<sup>6</sup> It has often been conflated with "primitive communism," but when there is no surplus there is no production. With no production and no articulated tribal identity, it's hard to find a means of production for a non-existent, yet well-defined, society to communally own.

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<sup>5</sup> Speaking specifically of Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*. Boston: Extending Horizons, undated [1902].

<sup>6</sup> Peter Gardner, 'Studying Pure Anarchists.' Lecture, CHAGS: Twelfth Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies. Penang, Malaysia. 2018.

You'd think the anarchists would rejoice, but, again, the ideal won. Anarchists were already in too deep, having constructed a hypothetical situation where civilization wasn't only desirable, but magically tenable. In the minds of the romantics, unshaken by both history and ecology, to break the course of Progress is heresy.

All the arguments come out; anarcho-primitivists romanticize hunter-gatherers. We can't turn back the clock. Genie is out of the bottle. Civilization is what *everyone* wants. It goes on and on. Anarchism, for anarchists, is seemingly superior to anarchy.

Likewise, one thing was horribly apparent: primal anarchy, where it exists, is profoundly lacking in anarchists. It doesn't need idealists and visionaries to exist. It's not planned and articulated, but actualized. As an anarchist, that's exciting. But it's also telling: we are anarchists because of what we oppose. In some cases, because of what we strive for. Individual flavors of anarchism remain the ideals that determine goals and targets.

Primal anarchy isn't content with that. Our bodies, minds, and the ways we relate with the world were forged within context. It's not just what we think, but how we see, how our bodies move, the way our nerves react to impulses, and the nagging refusals of domestication that have spurred anarchism and resistance to all forms of control, past, present, and future.

Primal anarchy isn't an ideal: it is our context.

This may sound semantic, but it is a significant shift. We aren't disempowered agents: we are captives of civilization, of domestication. We aren't yearning to find freedom, we yearn to express it and live within it. It is here, with us, now. It is both within and surrounding us.

A common critique of anarcho-primitivism is that we have drawn lines around nomadic hunter-gatherers. That any other society, no matter how close or far it is to hunter-gatherer life, has simply crossed the line. To some, it separates the work that anarcho-primitivism has produced from that of anarchist anthropologists like Pierre Clastres and James Scott, who have focused

grab and conquer a niche market have hijacked the majority of the Paleo world.

Though much of what we see is diluted or often convoluted, the illicit principle is here: you are a hunter-gatherer in mind and body, so you should, at the very least, eat like one. Cue a bunch of jarhead ex-military evoking "caveman" imagery. The point gets drowned out, but that exposes the bigger picture on a new level: domestication becomes clearest when you begin to see the patterns of historic time arising. In this case, it's pretty straightforward. Those selling Paleo foods (even packaged ones) are telling us something intrinsic about ourselves but intervening with sustenance-for-sale over subsistence.

Just as it has always been for domesticators, the closer something is to our actual human nature, the easier the sales pitch. If our interests are coddled and catered towards a consumer-based identity, then we're less likely to dig deeper. Bait and switch, this time on the genetic level. Human nature becomes apparent not through distilling blueprints of nomadic hunter-gatherer societies, but by filtering the institutions that arise with domestication, understanding their role and purpose. Here, you find the patterns. Even though their form might be radically different, their function is always the same: divert the needs of a nomadic hunter-gatherer through socio-economic and religious identities and rites.

The ability of marketers to capitalize on hunter-gatherer diets, lifestyle, and gadgets doesn't negate them; it just shows the power of social domestication. The lives of nomadic hunter-gatherers have always been the targets of domesticated societies and that remains true. They're hunted, systematically stripped of their land and their humanity, displaced and made destitute by missions, corporations, and governments, and deemed as evil or backwards by religion.

Even the existence of hunter-gatherers, as individuals and as societies, is such a threat to the fragile ecology of the civilized land-

## Re-wild, Resist.

I take it for granted that resistance is the natural human response to dehumanization and, therefore, does not have to be explained or justified. — Fredy Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*<sup>10</sup>

“Human nature exists.”<sup>11</sup>

Those are the opening words of anthropologist-turned-doctor Melvin Konner’s 2002 book, *Tangled Wing*. Konner’s work was with nomadic hunter-gatherer societies, much like Marjorie Shostak, who was the co-author of their 1988 book, *The Paleolithic Prescription*.<sup>12</sup> That book was the failed launch of what would eventually become the Paleo diet, along with its lifestyle aspects—from barefoot running to minimalism to natural movements and so on. It failed because it took dietary information from nomadic hunter-gatherers anecdotally and brought in a third author, Dr Boyd Eaton—also a physician—to tether the anecdotal information against contemporary medical practices and advice.

The book might not have taken off in even a fraction of the way that subsequent Paleo books and contributors have, but its premise is telling: we evolved to be nomadic hunter-gatherers. The same message that Shepard brought to the forefront decades earlier, but now in an actionable, scientifically approved package.

You have Paleo/Primal authors like Nora Gedgudas, absolute in her basis of proscriptive diet and lifestyle advice within nomadic hunter-gatherer life and respond directly to a world of industrial toxins.<sup>13</sup> Outside of that small circle, gurus and marketers ready to

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<sup>10</sup> Fredy Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1983. Pg 184.

<sup>11</sup> Melvin Konner, *The Tangled Wing*. New York: Holt, 2002. Pg xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Melvin Konner, Marjorie Shostak, and S. Boyd Eaton, *The Paleolithic Prescription*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Nora Gedgudas, *Primal Body, Primal Mind*. Rochester: Healing Arts Press,

on anarchism in horticultural and agrarian societies as a resistance to power in “societies against the State.”<sup>7</sup>

By taking primal anarchy as our baseline, those lines are gone. Vanished. To anarchists, we’ve just narrowed the ideal. But this is a complete recontextualization of our history and present, one that favors anarchy over anarchism. Primal anarchy closes the gap: anarchy is our nature. It is our natural state: we don’t just want egalitarianism or, as State-level societies mirror it, equality, we want wild communities built on freedom of movement and subsistence.

Every State, every civilization, has had to face that resistance.

Domesticators, politicians, priests, and programmers know this better than anarchists. Those pulling the reins aren’t smart enough to completely fabricate wants and needs, it’s far easier and more effective for them to tear apart the innate needs and wants that we have as social animals, repackaging them and have us work for them piecemeal.

They tell us that we chose to leave our “primitive” life in the hopes of having more. They know that if they remove our context, we’ll take part in the unending search for meaning. They know that if we can’t forage, then we’ll plant. If planting is taken from us, we’ll work for food.

Anarchists accept this. Anarchy refuses it. That is why we fight. That is why the entirety of civilization is a litany of struggles led by those who quit working, sat on the front lines, smashed police barricades, took the lives of capitalists and politicians, and burned the machinery of Progress.

Primal anarchy isn’t reducing our experience, but understanding it. We aren’t dead yet, we’ve just been broken to the idea that we can do something about our condition. Anarchists typically dream of their ideals as though they will be able to craft some new means

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<sup>7</sup> Most specifically, Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*. New York: Zone, 1989 [1974]. For Scott, this is a recurring theme through all of his work, particularly; *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale, 1985, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. New Haven: Yale, 2009, and *Against the Grain*. New Haven: Yale, 2017.

of subsistence. They believe the narrative that egalitarianism may have never existed, but take the risk anyway. They strive for the improbable because they fixate on the impossible.

What we have is a living legacy. When we start feeling it and finding our grounding again, then we can stop seeking our dreams through civilization's apparatus and vision. We can stop being bound to repeat the mistakes of history only to think that next time we'll do it better: we won't. Domestication has always had to work to undermine primal anarchy and more often than not, it fails. It has only built a mighty arsenal and it has bred a lot of bodies to throw into trenches.

But we have the upper hand: when we embrace primal anarchy, when we cease to be anarchists, we no longer have to play on their terms. Power and control were never meant to be harnessed, not by anyone. Civilization succeeds in cutting the throats or infecting the minds of those who seek to steer away from it. Primal anarchy reminds us that the world the domesticators have built leeches our living, wild world. That world is not dead, but it is being suffocated and suppressed. We can wallow through the rest of history, counting our dead as they fail to take control. Or we can dig deeper and follow the path of domination, find its bottlenecks and strangle them.

Primal anarchy reminds us that a functioning world isn't one where power is fought, but where it is rendered impossible.

## Future? Primitive?

The project of annulling time and history will have to be developed as the only hope of human liberation. —  
John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal*. Columbia, MO: CAL Press, 1999. Pg 29.

is a lie. Our past has virtually never broken down that way, even when looked at from the perspective of the civilized.

What is prevalent is our primal anarchy. Every single domesticating force, every single colonizer, every engineer and prophet, has had to fight against it. As social animals, that is why we tell mythic stories to implicate a cosmic meaning and power to be found in the fields, factories, workshops, and, now, outlet malls.

The struggle of civilization is the constant suppression of the wild. That includes the wild within us. It is our primary sense of want and need. It is the part of our mind that must be bargained with by bosses and administrators. It is the part of our body that sits at desks or stands in factories only to practice walking on a treadmill or stationary bike later.

When primitivism flips the table over, saying in defiance that we were better off before, a part of our grounding is lost. In reacting, we implicitly accept the timelines and inevitability of accumulated power in the hands of the State. It becomes easier for philosophers and literary critics to say that we've upheld the Fall-from-Eden myth, despite our protests and evidence to the contrary, for one simple reason: *primitive*, as a term, is always somewhere and someone else.

It accepts "The Fall" narrative because it can easily go from placing the origins of civilization in historic time to historicizing our domestication. From the viewpoint of primal anarchy, there was no grand event. There was a historical point of entry for domestication, but also an illicit understanding that it is a constant and on-going force.

Primitivism is born of nostalgia. Primal anarchy reminds us that domestication can and must be resisted at every single impasse. Being our *primary* state, when everything else is stripped from us, this is what remains: a wild animal.

It's hard to simply be sentimental about something when you realize you never lost it.

mestication to undo them. This isn't a task for a time machine, but of tracing patterns through history going back to where our separation from the world began.

The anarcho-primitivist critique has always been about finding patterns in history and the reflections of civilization. It seeks to understand how our own relationship with the world and each other is interpreted and placed within that lineage. Here, time itself is crucial to the domestication process: the civilized narrative is that *we* have changed. That *we* made a choice. That *we* strove to improve our condition and that a world of machines enhances *our* experience.

The ideology of civilization, when distilled, is that *we* don't only need civilization, but that we're better off because of it. Divergent views of the world stem back to the great questions of philosophers: what is the social contract and where did it begin?

But that level of articulated control never came overnight. It grew exceptionally slowly as hunter-gatherers settled around flush fields of wild grains and seeds or where plants were selectively planted and animals were ultimately domesticated. However, both of those things happened in relatively few places.

And, most tellingly, none of the outcomes have improved our lives in any qualitative way since. Yet this is the story that we are told and then tell ourselves over and over again. History is born of an agenda and that is to affirm that we are prisoners to time. If you want to hunt and gather for a living, that ship has sailed. Or so that's how the story is told.

This is such a twisted and small vision of the world. One that is demonstrably untrue.

Hunter-gatherer societies, embattled though they may be, still exist today. It is their adaptability and resilience that have helped them escape the earth-leveling path of civilization. The story we tell of foragers becoming gardeners, and then taking up herds of domestic animals in one hand and turning gardens into fields with the other, until technology permits a new era of industrial growth,

Anarchism has its own baggage, but primitivism might have more.

The term "anarchy" may predate the term "primitivism," but as a movement or reflection, primitivism has a slightly longer history. Art, music, literature; primitivism is all of these things on a wider level than it is a means of social critique. And even there, anarcho-primitivism might just be the loudest of its advocates.

But what primitivism can be is generally confusing. There's no consensus amongst those who have chosen the label and those who have had it applied. Without the anarcho- preface, it likely wouldn't have any teeth.

The indisputable aspect of "primitivism" is the root of the word: *primitive*. Taken on its own, that aspect gets a fair amount of negative attention. It would be wrong to say that as a term 'primitive' is free of judgment or value. It is treated as an insult towards Indigenous peoples because it is still widely used as one.

At its best, "primitive" was a part of the early anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's attempts to classify societies. Here you have three classifications: *savage*, *primitive*, and *barbarian*; or, hunter-gatherer, horticulturalist, and pastoralist/agrarian, in that order.<sup>9</sup> As imposed terms, there's no point in saying that this categorical application by a social science is neutral. Coming from an imperialist society, the colonialism is implicit. But, for whatever it's worth, it would seem that the usage of this strata was not intended for the horrifically racist justifications of colonizers.

That said, anarcho-primitivists have never denied that what was more lasting and impacting than Morgan's social theories were the realities of colonization. These terms were used to demean and to justify genocide and ethnocide, leaving the salvaged lives of Indigenous communities to be stripped down by missionaries and sold as prostitutes, slaves, and workers.

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995 [1877]. I've joked somewhat publicly that "anarcho-savagism" would

The “primitive” in primitivism remained because it accepted that this is how colonizers worked. And, as a big fuck you to the colonizers. The term flips the entire measure. In this regard, civilization hasn’t won by the force and will of inevitability, but has suppressed and decimated an ecologically and socially stable world to suffocate the rest in an imposed and ultimately failing civilization.

There’s a bit of street brawler in there that can easily be sanitized out of context. Philosophers and literary critics, the masters of thinking about thinking, have drug out the corpse of post-modernism and its latent uprooting to pull this purposefully aggressive reaction back into the realm of ideals.

For years, I’ve been dismissive of their attempts: usually saying primitivism could only be racist by upholding colonial idealism and on from there. Not that all critiques have no merit, but just that these ones were latently dismissive, not meant to engage. Likewise, they’ve rarely been worth engaging.

Personally, nothing about my views on the usage of “primitivism,” as a term, has changed fully in this regard. But I have to admit, I’m hardly alone in having pulled back from using “primitive” as a descriptor in nearly any other case, unless it’s within quotes or used more sarcastically. Removed from context, it just becomes distracting in unnecessary ways. I don’t know if that alone is reason to abandon the term, but it was enough to draw it into question. In doing this, there are more reasons why the term is as fitting as anarchism, if not less so.

Outside the issues with the word’s etymological base, there are bigger issues with its implications.

Primitivism lacks definitive context. “Primitive” is a considerably older word than primitivism and anarchism. It might have been more specifically implied as an “uncivilized person” (which is harder for anarcho-primitivists to take issue with), but it is a reactionary term. Much like anarchism.

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have been a more appropriate label over “anarcho-primitivism.”

Primitivism remains rooted in concepts of linear time. While many primitivists, like anarcho-primitivists, have actively attacked notions of history as a progressing and monolithic force, “primitive” here is self-referential. “Primitive” isn’t a horticultural society, but alluding to a “simpler,” less complex state. In many cases, that can be equally inclusive of the State or state-level societies.

Primitivism becomes diluted to the point of just meaning a preference for an earlier state of “social evolution.” Paul Shepard tried giving it power by speaking of a “post-historic primitivism.” No friend of the calendar or clock, John Zerzan’s “future primitive” is both a challenge and a threat to our understandings of time. Both have tried to free primitivism as a source of primal empowerment and a reminder that what goes up must come down.

Both, in my eyes, succeeded, but the caveats on the terms seem to just grow. As the critiques expand, the need to distance from so much impotent primitivism becomes more obvious. If you’ve passed billboards for “primitive” decor or any other agrarian throw back, you’ve probably winced as much as I have. Critics of anarcho-primitivism often toss out the lazy and tired response: “go live with the Amish then.” But we can only shrug so long before accepting that without heavy connotation, primitivism has no point of reference at all outside of “previous” or “earlier” times.

We can keep pressing on and rolling our eyes at it, relying necessarily on anarcho-primitivism as an all-or-none term, but I’d rather reassess here. This is another area where primal anarchy makes more sense.

The words *primal* and *primitive* share a lot of etymological history, but where they vary is significant. “Primitive” is used to imply simplicity. “Primal” is used to invoke primacy. To the point: “primitive” is *who* and *when*. “Primal” is *what*.

*Primal* is latent: not over there, but here. The distance of the past and place are removed because “primal” is what we are before being domesticated, colonized, and taken captive. Anarcho-primitivists have always sought to understand the roots of civilization and do-