

# Swamp Fever, Primitivism & the “Ideological Vortex”: Farewell to All That

David Watson

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## All Isms are Wasms

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 "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.

— Sunfrog

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 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 ail 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 [www.newleftreview.net](http://www.newleftreview.net). 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, available at [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com). 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 McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (1996).

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 ethnofascists, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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 ethnofascism 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 a no-brainer to be able to distinguish solidarity and antifascism from complacency about ethnofascist 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 1999–2000 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 [glypx.com/BalkanWitness/watson2.htm](http://glypx.com/BalkanWitness/watson2.htm) .

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

A review of the following texts:

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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). Somone 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

- *Green Apocalypse*, Luther Blissett, Stewart Home, and the Neoist Alliance (London: Unpopular Books [Box 15, 138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS UK], 1996), £3.50
- *Into the 1990's With Green Anarchist*, Steve Booth (London: Green Anarchist Books [PO Box 407, Camberley GU15 3FL, England], 1996), £4
- Green Anarchist (BCM 1715, London WC1N 3XX, England, 5 issues / £3.75)
- debate on primitivism in *Transgressions: A Journal of Urban Exploration* (c/o Alistair Bonnett, Geography Department, University of Newcastle, Newcastle NE1 7RU, England, individual subscriptions £15 / year [two issues])
- *A Primitivist Primer*, John Moore (Dead Trees Earth First!, c/o South downs EF! Prior House, Tilbury Place, Brighton, E. Sussex, England; Primitivist Network, PO Box 252, Rickmands-worth, WD3 3AY, England), no date or price
- *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*, Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), \$7.00

“When at a banquet, where the guests have already overeaten, one person is concerned about bringing on new courses, another about having a vomitive at hand ...”

— Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

## 1. An Ugly Dispute

According to its introduction, the essays and documents reprinted in the pamphlet *Green Apocalypse* “chronicle an ugly dispute between *Green Anarchist* and the Neoist Alliance” in England. Ugly, indeed. Published by Unpopular Books (which takes as its logo, appropriately, a frowning “smile face” — an image simultaneously simple-minded and caustic), *Green Apocalypse* is the product of the Neoist Alliance, an iconoclastic group associated with post/pro-situationist gadfly Stewart Home. The Neoists are an amalgam of aesthetic vanguardism and ultra-leftish swagger; the Green Anarchists are influenced by a mix of eco-anarchism and U.S. anti-authoritarian and European ultra-left politics. Their feud has generated an abundant, confusing and rather fetid midden of materials. Only the most persevering investigator could decipher this mess; most people quite understandably won’t bother.

But there is some reason to discuss these issues, as I hope will become clear in the course of this essay. Recently four editors of the *Green Anarchist* newspaper were charged with “conspiracy to incite criminal damage” and face up to ten years in prison. (See “Tales of the Planet” in the Summer 1997 *Fifth Estate* for details.) At a time when the GAs face government repression, according to Luther Blissett (an author of *Green Apocalypse* and one of the principal protagonists of the dispute), the Neoist pamphlet and other materials demonstrate that *Green Anarchist* “is creating a new variety of fascism, which projects itself as having emerged from the left, but actually has its roots in the right.” Identifying the GAs as fascists could undermine their appeals for support. No one has raided the Neoist lately.

Blissett’s description is not of a new form of fascism but rather the classic variety. Fascism drew not only from conservative, nationalist rhetoric, and actual communal and ecological anxieties, but from a plebeian-leftist rhetoric as well. (The nazis were after all a “national socialist workers party.”) Accusations of ecofascism are legion this season. Of course, fascists like everyone else can colonize ecology for their own purposes, and radical ecology types are as capable of passing over to rightism and fascism as some leftists and even ultra-lefts have already proven to be. But finding superficial parallels between fascist misuses of ecological sensibilities and authentic ecological concerns (the defense of community, spirituality, small scale farming and technics, for example), is hardly evidence of ecofascism. Likewise, Blissett spends much time on what he considers to be the fascist implications of Bakuninism, but connects



Bakuninism to GA mainly through a single line in a single book review. And because they supposedly read radical theory shallowly (which may be true), we are told, “it is not unfair” to describe GA’s writing on such topics as the Situationist International “as a form of ‘historical revisionism.’” This gives them “much in common with those other historical revisionists, the neo-Nazi ‘intellectuals’ ...”

Such is the quality of the Neoist accusations throughout: exaggeration, obfuscation, indignation and bluff. While the text denies any “desire to demonize the individuals criticized,” it slurs them as a “hate group” of “vile” ecofascists, “an ideological vortex or sucking pit,” “thoroughly Bakuninist in both its incoherent theorizing and its reactionary activist practice,” a “schizophrenic” cabal suffering from the “activist disease, or swamp fever.” (Elsewhere, the Neoists praise the “energetic activism” of many members of the Green Anarchist Network as “an inspiration of others,” only undermined by their association with a single member of GA. Just who is schizophrenic?)

## Shields and battering rams

It should be at least vaguely humbling to all the parties of this squabble that I was the only member of the *Fifth Estate* collective who felt compelled to read and respond to these documents. (In fact, probably a block away from the unfolding of their dramas no one even knows they exist, let alone understands their dispute.) Sadly, even though GAs seem to be involved in good work along with other radical ecology groups, *Green Anarchist* has not been read very closely here.

Nevertheless, I think this journal has some responsibility to address this squabble, even if we come to it late (and even if we decided to stop talking about it after having had our say). First of all, GA literature presents the FE as co-thinkers, or precursors, in what appears to be coalescing into a political tendency of “anarcho-primitivist” militants. Secondly, Blissett’s essay in *Green Apocalypse*, “The Sucking Pit: How Green Anarchism Accelerates the Process of Decomposition within the Swamp,” takes up my *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?* to flog *Green Anarchist* for misappropriating the book’s arguments as “a rhetorical shield.” In fact, Blissett degrades them into a rhetorical battering ram.<sup>8</sup>

The Neoists reveal their ignorance of ecological discourse, radical or otherwise, in their introduction, a facile discussion of the history of apocalyptic thinking. “Rooted in real concerns about the commodification of the environment,” intones Neoist Richard Essex, the idea of ecological apocalypse “distracts the process of developing a strategy against such depredation with a mythic green crusade based on moral elitism rooted in universal justification.” While there is some truth to this observation, we also need to keep in mind that the global greenhouse, the collapse of marine fisheries, the disappearing ozone layer and similar megatechnic disasters are more than mere examples of commodification. But rather than our being “on the verge of ecological disaster,” he argues, “control over decent air to breath [sic], water to drink, food to eat, will become another element of social control.”

Such a mediocre (and anthropocentric, ethically obtuse) formulation fails to note that we are not on the verge of an ecological disaster but presently undergoing it; his own scenario of what is to come (also arguably apocalyptic, by his logic) is already the case. And whatever Essex means by “universal justification,” the Neoists’ pompous dismissal of the contemporary recognition of ecological catastrophe is based on their own marxist messianism. (As Blissett says in the *Transgressions* debate, “The overthrow of civilization is the task of communism.” And elsewhere, the institution of communism is “the only means by which the proletariat can defeat fascism” — or in fact do much of anything, one gathers.)

The Neoists call malthusianism a “litmus test” of ecofascism, and GAs malthusians, therefore fascists. Yet they provide little more evidence than a line in *Green Anarchist* in which a writer speculates that if the deadly Ebola virus that broke out in Zaire last year were to spread around the world, “all our over population [sic] problems will be over.” Not having seen the original article, one cannot be entirely sure of the author’s intent, but since no evidence is cited that GAs *welcome* such a possibility, it seems fairly

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<sup>8</sup> See my *How Deep Is Deep Ecology? With an Essay-Review on Woman’s Freedom*, written under the pseudonym George Bradford (Ojai: Times Change Press, 1989).

innocuous. (In any case, given their own fascination with irony and ambiguity, the Neoists might have suspected some irony in the GA remark — if their own intentions weren't so transparently malicious.) Accused of neo-malthusian fascism by the Neoists, *Green Anarchist* replied that their population politics are essentially the pro-feminist, radical social justice perspectives of my *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?*, arguing that “current population levels aren't a problem but if they were, women's control over their own fertility would sort it ...” Blissett argues that this response “is more than just reductionist rhetoric, it destroys the logic of [the book's] argument.” Sorry, but I don't see how the GA response destroys the logic of my argument, even if it doesn't fully explicate it.

## A barren defense of industrialism

If the GAs are malthusians, that would be no automatic “litmus test” of fascism, as the Neoists argue. Everything depends on context. But the Neoists haven't even proven the GAs are malthusians. Though they decry the lack of memory and sense of history among “swamp inhabitants,” Blissett and his comrades apparently learned little from the deep ecology debates of the late 1980s — debates which should have deepened everyone's ecological and political understanding. The Neoist brief, on the other hand, mostly damns the prosecution. It is a caricature of *Fifth Estate* polemics against catastrophist deep ecologists in the 1980s, superficially imitating our objections to explicitly right-wing (or at least ethically offensive) utterances made by EF!ers such as Christopher Manes, Dave Foreman, Daniel Conner and Edward Abbey. For example, Manes (as Miss Ann Thropy) did not merely note that a mass epidemic could render the population problem moot, but *celebrated* AIDS for its potential to do so. This might have passed as a sick joke, barely worth mention, had it not occurred in a larger context in which Conner published ostensibly scientific articles calling AIDS a conscious Gaian feedback, a revenge against human chauvinism. Meanwhile, Foreman advocated letting third world people die in famines as a natural (final?) solution, suggesting as well that the U.S. close its borders to refugees to keep them from stealing “our resources.” Abbey agreed, calling Latin American immigrants “culturally-morally-genetically impoverished.”<sup>9</sup> Nothing the Neoists cite from *Green Anarchist* comes even close to this kind of malignant prattle. Yet they think that repeating the same harmless quotes over and over again “conclusively demonstrates” their case.

None of the Neoist accusations amount to much of anything. Supposedly, GAs are fascist because of their guerrillaist notion that third world revolutions in the periphery will encircle the industrialized center — a fatuous remnant of 1960s leftism, perhaps, but far from fascist. GA anti-tax posters, dating from the period of the early 1990s British poll tax revolt, are also cited, since “anti-tax agitation is a favoured tactic of the extreme right” — as if anarchists wouldn't have something to say about taxation, perhaps even to rightists, who also (we have to hope) have some latent human capacity to change sides, and become authentic radicals.

Around the time of the Persian Gulf War, everyone in the dispute agrees, *Green Anarchist* founder Richard Hunt went over to an explicit right-wing or ecofascist position. No movement is invulnerable to such corrosive political fragmentation and demoralization; to their credit, the GAs campaigned against Hunt, initiating a boycott of his new publication, *Green Alternative*. Neoists make much of Hunt's remark that England's population would have to be significantly reduced. But believing human population should be lowered in the interest of other species and ecological life-webs, indeed, in the interest of human beings — as people as diverse as liberal humanists Paul and Anne Ehrlich, deep ecologists like Gary Snyder, radical EF! wild women like Kelpie Wilson, anarcho-syndicalist biocentrists like Judi Bari, and *I myself* have all believed — does not automatically suggest death camps, holocaust or fascism. The desire for gradual transition to a planet with fewer people, a desire tempered by the recognition of interrelated ethical imperatives, is never even imagined by the Neoists. By their logic one

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<sup>9</sup> See E. B. Maple, “Ideology as Material Force: Earth First! and the Problem of Language,” Spring 1988 FE; E.B. Maple, “Edward Abbey: We Rest Our Case,” Summer 1988 FE; and George Bradford, “Cheerleaders for the Plague,” Spring 1989 FE.

could argue that given population necessities, the defense of wilderness, or of any non-human nature, might also imply fascism. If, as they also imply, *any* protest by rural society against modernization is inherently fascist, one could as easily argue that any defense of former modes of life, or of craft, region, neighborhood, community or family is also fascist. But that would be an utterly specious argument.

In fact, the crux of the Neoist argument is simply a barren, unexamined defense of industrialism and mass technics. The Neoists naively believe that “Syndicalism shows that it is possible to have a complex industrial society without hierarchies,” presumably not only at a 1930s level of development contemporary with the Spanish Revolution but with the technology of the 1990s. They insist that since GAs “don’t explain how they plan to move from a complex mass society that can support a large population, to a world of small agricultural communities where there is less technology,” they must be fascists. (Of course Neoists are no more explicit about how they plan to bring about communist social relations; maybe that makes them stalinists.) GA’s desire to reduce or dismantle mass society’s industrial work pyramid supposedly “necessitates a reduction in population levels if it is to be meaningfully implemented ...” This argument is itself a sub-species of malthusianism masquerading as revolutionary theory. The perspective of *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?* was that industrial capitalism, rather than artificially ensuring an otherwise impossible subsistence, was *undermining* age-old patterns of subsistence by its fabrication of an untenable form of industrialized existence, both in the short run and for the future, and that both malthusians and anti-malthusian defenders of industrialism labored under the same zero-sum ideology. To the Neoists, as to the deep ecology eco-catastrophists they oppose, *Green Anarchist* “attacks on what it calls technological ‘mass society’” necessitate a commitment to a huge and presumably rapid reduction of the population. By this logic, Thoreau, Gandhi, Mumford, Ellul, ecofeminists, neo-luddites, bioregionalists, even the *Fifth Estate* are fascists. But most of us know better.

## Invisible dictatorships

Ironically, the Neoists accuse others of a sinister Bakuninism, but they themselves, with their explicit, stated program of scission, misinformation and scandal against anyone they disapprove of, resemble Nechaevite gangsters out to establish their own “invisible dictatorship.” “Belief is the enemy,” they declare, a conundrum they consider none other than “a watchword of the revolutionary movement”; and their flyers and texts attempt to scandalize by proclaiming, “End social relations,” “Overthrow the human race,” and the notorious fascist slogan, “Long live death.” “Only the Neoist Alliance has grasped the necessary conjunction between nihilism and historical consciousness,” they remind their bludgeoned reader. Their provocations can be singularly cowardly, as when they published a flyer falsely attributed to Salman Rushdie announcing an event to burn the Koran in order to defy islamic fundamentalists. Of course, not they but Rushdie has been sentenced to death by people quite willing to carry out the threat. Though they pronounce, “Humanity will not be happy until the last book bore is hung by the guts of the last mullah” (will people ever tire of such threadbare, antique provocations?), “book bore” Rushdie is, after all — as Neoist subcomandante M. Home has described himself, if ironically — only a “‘solitary’ English novelist,” and hardly deserving of an islamic (or Neoist) *fatwa*.

The Neoists also produced and disseminated leaflets calling for death camps and praising Pol Pot, forgeries claiming to be from Green Anarchists. Of course, Home explains after the fact in *Green Apocalypse*, it’s “clear to anyone who reads the text carefully” that it’s a satire; the fact that some recipients of the flyer believed it to be authentic “demonstrates that the general level of intelligence in the world today is sorely lacking, and it is precisely this situation that makes GA’s ideology dangerous” — which of course if the Neoists are as smart as they pretend to be they’d have to have known all along. Thus Home attempts to hold GAs responsible for the slanders *he* perpetrated on *them*.

Of course, Home concedes, “it would be unrealistic to expect [readers] to spot all the allusions we make, since no one can be expected to know *everything*.” But Neoists refuse to take responsibility for what they say and write; one never knows if they are speaking in their own voice (as when they warn the proletariat and the “revolutionary milieu” about fascist dangers), or if some other voice —

irreverent, contrived, and mean-spirited — is being employed. These pomo poseurs dismiss those who “read our propaganda as though it were the product of an anchored authorial voice ... Our explorations of the phenomenon of projection and unconscious mirroring illustrate the ways in which all ideology is shaped by discourse ...” *Green Anarchist* writers are to be held responsible for every nuance, detail and potential interpretation of what they say; Neoists only “illustrate ... discourse” (though one never knows to whom). They must enjoy being the only ones to know for sure if they are speaking or projecting. One is reminded of Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels’ remark: “We do not talk to say something, but to obtain a certain effect.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Neoists attack anti-fascism as bourgeois, reformist, perhaps counter-revolutionary — only to become crusading anti-fascists. They attack the lack of coherence among green radicals, only to argue that Neoists are “not interested in offering a coherent ideological program.” They attack GAs for attempting to work with and organize other activists, but they themselves claim to provide “new ‘idea-forces’ which have an organizing effect” on their audience. Defining fascism as a kind of parasitic “vampire that feeds on real social movements,” they attack these selfsame social movements as if to apply some perverse and pretentious anti-fascist chemotherapy. Rather than engaging others in some constructive way, they become a species of vampire themselves, turning their irresponsible vendettas into a kind of vanguardist careerism. As they themselves have commented, the Neoists need to consider how “anti-fascism ... can very easily be transformed into its opposite, that is to say fascism.” They would do well to take their own advice, which they frequently give to others (like the GAs), to *dissolve their group*. Everyone will benefit — from the trees that won’t have to be cut for their pamphlets to the people delivered from Neoist noise, whether or not they inhabit a “swamp.” (And get some metaphor other than this tired, leftist leftover; Thoreau called swamps nature’s marrow.)

## Militant spasms

Yet we can learn even from those who attack us; Green Anarchists would do well to take up the challenge to reexamine their perspective, and attempt to explain more coherently their ideas on population and other issues. Their emphasis (as Steve Booth puts it in his *Into the 1990’s with Green Anarchist*) on “revolutionary action over theory” is a naive evasion of responsibility, since every action presumes some theoretical premise, however crude or inchoate. Reading GA say of such phenomena as the Unabomber, the Japanese Aum cult (which spread poison gas in Tokyo subways), and the Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City that they are “inspirational and open up wide ranges of new possibilities,” one has to conclude that like the broken clock that is correct at least every twelve hours, the Neoists have a point. This is also the case in GA’s clinging to and continuing to distribute early writings of Richard Hunt, whose reactionary tendencies (sexism, hierarchy and a defense of xenophobia, for example) are rightly pointed out by the Neoists, and grounds enough to scrap his dubious contribution altogether.

(In answer to criticisms of their glee over the Oklahoma bombing, the GA’s response was even more disturbing: “We do think offing a towerblock full of FBI pigs is ‘inspirational’ *tactically*, just as we think IRA ‘spectaculars’ are ...” This statement evinces little idea of just who might be passing through the halls of a typical local Federal Building (in fact there were almost no police agents in the building when the bomb exploded). Furthermore, it willfully disregards the intimate connection between means and ends; the GAs apparently think there is a clear division between right-wing militia and IRA nationalist ideologies (which they disapprove of) and the authoritarian, inhuman means employed (which they support).

The problem of theory and action is also immediately apparent in the banner of the GA newspaper (which reads, “For the Destruction of Civilization”), and the so-called “results pages” which Booth says are intentionally placed in the front of their publication. It is one thing to write critically about the

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<sup>10</sup> Goebbels cited in Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. x.

dialectic of civilization and empire, its origins and contradictions, and to challenge the assumptions embedded in the ideology of progress. It's quite another to think you're forging a political tendency to carry out civilization's destruction. Whether or not it's Bakuninist, this is a fantasy contaminated by today's style of paranoid politics, an ugly and authoritarian fantasy at that, as is suggested by the passive-aggressive rage of the Unabomber text (which the GAs have published as an example, however flawed, of their tendency's position).<sup>11</sup>

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. I for one am disappointed that GA abandoned its banner slogan, "For a Free Society in Harmony With Nature," for the vague cage-rattling of "For the Destruction of Civilization." According to Booth, the change is "because the times have got more desperate, more urgent, and this is a more emphatic expression of our thinking" — reasoning which reminds me of the futile paroxysms of the SDS Weatherman faction in the late 1960s. Intoxicated by street-fighting with cops, and convinced conditions were now too dire to engage people openly in neighborhoods, schools and workplaces on a multiplicity of crucial social issues, this tiny band of authoritarian vanguardists decided to "bring the war home." They were sincere, and at times desperate, but things might be a little less dire now if they had not so thoroughly succumbed to their desperation then.

Though containing much that is laudable, *Green Anarchist* at its worst reads like someone shouting as loudly as possible to drown out any doubts about the enterprise. The "results pages" — various entries documenting alleged ecodefense and resistance — are a mixed bag, too. One may read of admirable endeavors and acts of resistance, but might just as easily run across questionable entries like rioting on October 27, 1996 by Islamic militants in Pakistan, and for September 28, 1996: "Kabul, Afghanistan — Taliban militia execute former president Najibullah, and suspend corpses from traffic platform. That's the way to do it!" Such macho militaristic vehemence makes one wonder if there isn't some fascistic character structure at play in GA enthusiasms after all. For November 1, we read that four are hurt by a car bomb in Spain; on November 8, "75 year old woman poppy collector robbed"; on November 11, "12–13 year olds slash bus driver" in Liverpool. A graphic shows a rat carrying a club with the logo, "Animal Liberation ... or else!" Meat markets appear to be as evil as nuclear power plants. Antipedophiles protest, gun owners rally, students protest tuition hikes; arson, "Hell's Angel club bombing, four injured." What does this have to do with radical theory *or* practice? What does GA stand for?

Like the *Green Anarchist* paper, Booth's pamphlet seems reasonable, decent, and heartfelt, despite its occasional questionable statements. Yet references to the end of the days of "Gandhian wank" and glamorized scenarios of demonstrations in which so-called "fluffies" — who are they, people with their kids in strollers? — are smashed up between brawling militants and cops, make me wonder if the GAs haven't lost all sense of proportion. It isn't simply a question of theoretical confusion, it's a matter of arrogance. As I have argued in other contexts, the more extreme our ideas the more humble we should be about their application.<sup>12</sup> 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 (embracing the tactics, say, of IRA or militia "spectaculars" — a telling word), becoming ever more frenetic and violent as it becomes more dogmatic

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<sup>11</sup> See *Industrial Society and Its Future: The Unabomber's Manifesto* (Camberly: Green Anarchist Books, no date). The unnamed editor of *Green Anarchist* distances the group from the Unabomber's manifesto for "its reductionism and machismo," but it would be hard to find a more reductionist and macho treatment of the issue. The editor applauds the bombings and jeers at people maimed and killed, comments that the Unabomber "made good with the deed sixteen times in as many years," and congratulates the bomber "in his new career as ecoteur." There is no reflection on the ramifications of FC's agreement to stop killing people if the manifesto is published.

<sup>12</sup> See in particular "Catching Fish in Chaotic Waters," in the Winter 1995 *FE*; also "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology: The Ethics of Permanent Crisis and the Permanent Crisis in Ethics," and "The Question of Agriculture (written under the pseudonym George Bradford), in the Spring 1989 *FE*.

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.

## 2. Primitivists and parasites

Perhaps I've gotten some of this wrong; it's not easy to assess the plethora of tendencies, tracts and post office boxes in England. Certainly, they get it wrong in Albion when talking about us; Booth's descriptions of *Green Anarchist's* American "anarcho-primitivist" influences, for example, are muddled, not only in some particulars but in the more serious failure to understand critical differences between the various voices that Booth mistakenly poses as a kind of school.

Damning evidence of such confusion can also be found in a debate in the Neoist-influenced journal, *Transgressions*. The debate is comprised of two articles — John Moore's "City Primeval: Fredy Perlman, Primitivism and Detroit," and Luther Blissett's reply, "From *Socialisme ou Barbarie* to Communism or Civilization." Moore, whom Booth's pamphlet calls "perhaps the leading British Primitivist," and who has recently penned *A Primitivist Primer*, looks every bit the bewildered anthropologist in his contorted description of Detroit and what he considers the origins of anarcho-primitivism. A friend who was involved in 1975 in turning the *Fifth Estate* into an antiauthoritarian journal commented with a laugh after reading this idealized field report that we ought to ask *Transgressions* for the address of the people Moore describes, since they seem awfully interesting.

However sympathetic he may be to this project, Moore's interpretation of Detroit is absurdly spectacularized — especially his highly ideological thesis that the impoverished, inner city, multi-racial, student/counter-culture neighborhood I live in and where the *FE* offices are located is the context for the evolution "from the late 1970s onward, into the praxis that has come to be called primitivism ... also known as radical primitivism or anarcho-primitivism." One can only ask here: *known by whom?* This portrayal of activities in which I happen to have participated does not remotely resemble reality. John: there is no such "primitivist praxis," unless one thinks discussion groups, flyers, strike-support, anti-war and environmental demonstrations, draft counseling, anarchist free spaces and soup kitchens, guerrilla theater, poetry readings, etc., somehow constitute a primitivist practice recognizably distinct from radical or anarchist activity in general.

This self-delusion reaches almost comic extremes; in scholastic fashion, and lacking any first-hand knowledge of the place, Moore constructs his thesis on an extravagantly interpretive reading of a handful of texts. Hence, with relentless, procrustean zeal, he classifies an actual experience of spontaneous self-organization as a conscious, ideologically driven program, pronouncing a local anarchist temporary autonomous zone "a clear attempt to put primitivist — and Camattian — principles into action." The problem is that the space (which lasted only a couple of years) was not created by *FE* staffers or "Camattians" but by a group of young anarchists who were mostly reading anarchist classics, *Bolo' Bolo* and Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z.*, and who, except for one or two exceptions on the periphery of the *FE* at the time, had nothing to do with this newspaper. Besides, nothing Moore cites about the anarchist spaces in Detroit distinguishes them from anarchist infoshops and storefronts anywhere else. His primer parallels this error, describing anarcho-primitivism as "a convenient label" for "diverse individuals with a common project: the abolition of all power relations — e.g., structures of control, coercion, domination, and exploitation — and the creation of a form of community that excludes all such relations." This is more or less simply *anarchism*; Moore's classifications are too convenient for their own good.

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.”<sup>13</sup> 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, whose influences are erroneously represented by Moore’s pamphlet and who is said to have provided “a primitivist theoretical agenda” in his poetic counter-story to progress, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*, insisted — as Moore notes without apparently understanding Fredy’s implication — 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.”<sup>14</sup>

## Farewell to ideological primitivism

Moore may disagree, but I was there, and even wrote some of the texts cited in his essay and primer (including “Renew the Earthly Paradise,” from the Winter/Spring 1986 *FE*, which is misprinted in his text). Despite a disclaimer that it is “merely a personal account,” and that, “Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as anarcho-primitivism or anarcho-primitivists,” *A Primitivist Primer*, like Moore’s *Transgressions* essay, borders on an attempt to codify a primitivist sensibility. Its catechism-like question-and-answer format and its indirect suggestion of primitivist taxonomy give it an “objective,” descriptive authority. It even comes with a kind of five-point action program. Phrases like “From the [the?] perspective of anarcho-primitivism” and “according to anarcho-primitivists” abound. Moore also marginalizes crucial, definitive differences between ostensible members of this apocryphal school.

One might blame the primer’s confusion on difficulties inherent in summarizing or abbreviating any amorphous, diverse phenomenon; but considering the primer and the *Transgressions* essay together, Moore’s attempt to classify and historically situate so-called primitivism based on what are mostly the activities, writings and ideas of others, particularly in the name of a movement which he has apparently founded, does look suspiciously parasitical (which Blissett accuses him of). It is worth noting that while Moore turns a few *FE* articles into the origins of a “current,” an “anti-civilization movement,” the people here in Detroit who wrote many of these articles not only have had important differences among themselves but have growing doubts about pretenses to an anarcho-primitivist perspective or movement.

For his part, Moore thinks this movement surpasses anarchism, feminism, etc., because it opposes not only manifestations but “the totality of civilization.” Others categorized as anarcho-primitivists may share such abstract and self-serving formulations, but I believe the claim to oppose “the totality” of civilization is empty theoretical bravado, even if it sounds radical — like claiming to oppose “all” technology, which, unless we immediately draw careful distinctions between technology, technics and tools, implies all things technical, and thus muddles any possibility of reasonable discussion about such matters. Moore makes the same error in a section entitled, “How does anarcho-primitivism view technology?” He answers, “Technology is the sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of those separations mediating us from each other.” Moore’s definition of mediations may be different from mine, but it seems to me that to regard all mediations as unambiguous separations is to oppose inevitable mediations like language, music, symbolism, cooking, and even the most simple technical implements like the digging stick and the bowl. Moore’s subsequent comment, that “anarcho-primitivists thus oppose technology or the technological system, but not the use of tools and implements,”

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (1974; New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1981), p. 207, quoted in “Renew the Earthly Paradise,” Winter/Spring 1986 *Fifth Estate*. Diamond’s book is one of the most important and far-reaching recent attempts to develop a comprehensive critique of civilization, a reasoned primitivism.

<sup>14</sup> Fredy Perlman, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983); *The Strait: Book of Obenabi. His Songs* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1988). For Fredy’s comment, “The only -ist name I respond to is ‘cellist,’” see Lorraine Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much: A Chronicle of Fredy Perlman’s Fifty Years* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1989), p. 96.

does little to clarify what the important differences between tools and a mass technological system might be.<sup>15</sup>

Opposition to *all* mediations may in fact define the outlook of a certain current of primitivism — all ten or twelve of them, I imagine. I wish them luck. 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.

“Anarcho-primitivism is an anti-systemic current,” writes Moore. In that case perhaps I *am* an anarcho-primitivist; as time goes by and the primitivist idea becomes the reified object of sociological treatises and ideological agendas, I want less to do with it. There is nothing wrong with people gathering to talk about critical anthropology, technology, alternative epistemologies, the idea of a counter-history, progress and ideology, etc., as the Primitivist Network claims to do. But given the increasingly brief “shelf-life” of both ideas and ideologies in late modern capitalism, primitivism is less and less a nuanced

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<sup>15</sup> For some detailed discussion of the differences, see Langdon Winner’s *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1977), and Neil Postman’s *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992). While not analyzing differences between tools and technology, Diamond still provides something like a neo-primitivist critique of technology in his observation that “science and technology, reified and divorced from the human context and from social application, are no more than mechanical fetishes. The belief in the progress of an abstract science or technology is a peculiarly Western fallacy [which] ... is related to the irrational production of commodities, over which ordinary people have no control, but which they are conditioned to consume. In the joint perspective of the worker and the consumer, the machines take on a life of their own — after all, they have not invented them, and have no voice in their use or replication. The imperious ring of the telephone, for example, interrupts all other activities. Its trivial, dissociated and obsessive use reflects both the alienating character of the society that prizes it so highly, and the transnational corporations that profit from it. Thus the telephone as ordinarily used becomes a sign, not of communication, but of the lack of communication, and of the consequent compelling desire to relate to others, but to relate at a distance — and in the mode of a frustrated orality. The telephone is not an abstractly or inherently ‘rational’ instrument, but an integrated aspect of the repressive culture of monopoly capitalism. In our society, the machine becomes the mediator, and finally the locus of dissociated personal impulses.” He adds in a note, “Monopoly capitalism seeks to overcome its contradictions by producing goods and services that absorb and displace attention from the isolation and frustration that its form of society generates; these objects and services then become necessary, a sign of progress, a proof of prestige for those who ‘own’ them, a symptom of class collaboration, and a way of holding people at large, who have no other alternatives, to ransom. They are, in other words, addictions.” (Diamond, *ibid.*, pp. 43–4)

<sup>16</sup> John Zerzan, for example, who is listed as one of the primitivist luminaries by Moore and the GAs, thinks language and symbolization, which are rooted genetically and physiologically in the human species, reflect this repressive “totality.” See his *Elements of Refusal* (Seattle: Left Bank Books, 1988) and *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia/Anarchy, 1994). Seeing culture itself as the enemy, such a view leaves little if any solid ground on which to resist repressive civilization, or to cultivate a liberatory society.



orientation (held, we should constantly remind ourselves, by people facing the same challenges and duties as everyone else in this society), and more and more a fool's paradise, the dogma of a gang (in the "Camattian" sense, as it were), however irrelevant and however sincere — potentially even a racket.

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."<sup>17</sup> This is like deep ecology catastrophism, which takes various manifestations of the disease for the remedy. Yet Booth's *Into the 1990's* lists the Unabomber alongside other supposed anarcho-primitivists like Perlman, the *FE*, Zerzan, etc., arguing that he "expressed the best and the predominant thinking in contemporary North American Anarchism..."

Perhaps Green *Anarchist* thinks dismantling civilization means IRA-style "spectaculars," Aum-style home-made gas chambers, or Taliban-style street hangings — all under a primitivist rubric, of course. Marx once said of his epigones that he'd sown dragons only to reap fleas; I find myself wondering whether the few small fleas of reorientation and revolt I helped to plant didn't contribute to a harvest of dragons — clumsy, toothless, literal-minded, inflated dragons, perhaps, but no less embarrassing and depressing. 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. Perhaps I'm the one glamorizing now, but I was impressed when I visited the anarchist community in Philadelphia a few years ago, where anarchists young and old and of every possibly prefix found ways to work with each other and respect each other, and to accomplish some admirable projects. 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?

## A hundred and one versions

Blissett is correct in the *Transgressions* debate when he criticizes Moore's "fetishizing [various Detroit anarchist projects] around primitivist ideology." But his own attempt to place *FE* neo-luddism and primitivist sensibilities fully within left libertarian communism suffers from a similar hagiographic scholasticism. Hence very few of the connections he makes between our circle and other radical groups he thinks influenced us are relevant or even accurate. Succumbing to a simplistic sociology, Blissett argues that "the presence of an industrial working class centered around Detroit's motor industry" nurtured the *FE* and its perspectives — which must have *some* truth to it, relying as it does on the inescapable

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<sup>17</sup> See *Industrial Society and Its Future: The Unabomber's Manifesto*, paragraphs 166 and 182. The "two main tasks," says the text in crudely instrumental language, "are to promote social stress and instability in industrial society and to develop and propagate an ideology that opposes technology and the industrial system." (paragraph 181) One would think that radical green anarchists, fully aware of the social chaos caused by industrialism itself and a desire for a genuine social coherence, and wary as they must be of ideology itself, having learned its dangers from situationist and ultra-left theory, would have seen through such simplistic and manipulative notions. To each one his chimera, as Baudelaire once quipped.

fact of our living here. But then he argues that deindustrialization and the eclipse of auto production in Detroit “fostered [the *FE*] critique of technology,” reducing us to sociologically determined puppets.

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. Blissett seems to think that if Detroit had undergone an economic-technological boom our neo-luddite outlook wouldn’t have emerged. (In case no one has told him, industrialism continues to function in Detroit.) 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.

The same goes for the sensibilities loosely called primitivism. As Blissett himself rightly says, “Ever since the Bible came out, civilization has produced a hundred and one literary visions of the simplicities of primitive life.” 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, as Blissett does, that the critique of civilization emerged internationally within the ultra-left milieu, and that therefore, “The overthrow of civilization is the task of communism” (Blissett’s own version of primitivism). 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,” as Blissett calls it, of the international left-communist current, no matter how much it influenced him. In fact, one might explain this development as the actual unfolding of Lakota writer Chief Luther Standing Bear’s prediction in his classic essay, “What the Indian Means to America”: the white invader, he said, was “too far removed from its formative processes” to understand the American continent. “The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil ... But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers’ bones.” Slowly men and women

have been born and reborn; this new sensibility may mean that the roots of the tree of our lives are beginning to grasp rock and soil.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, not surprisingly, the radical nostalgia for former lifeways which Moore identifies with the anarcho-primitivist movement is actually to be found in diverse manifestations among a spectrum of social groups. 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. We continue to experience the trauma of the dissolution of human community by the earliest empires, and the challenge of how to renew communal life, necessarily and inescapably on a new level. Some people suspect this challenge means healing ourselves and our societies after a relentlessly bad and meaningless trip rowing aimlessly in the dank depths of civilization's galley ship, rather than reciting the dialectician's dogma of a yet-unfulfilled evolutionary promise that required our being expelled from paradise *in order to renew it* (as Bookchin's version of the fairy tale has it). This refusal to genuflect to progress is hardly evidence of fascism. But it still demands far more circumspection than is evidenced by Green Anarchists.

### 3. Ecofascism and anti-ecofascism

This brings us back to the question of ecofascism. Biehl's and Staudenmaier's *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* may be helpful in warning that, as Staudenmaier argues, "'Ecology' alone

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<sup>18</sup> Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), p. 248. On civilization, Luther Standing Bear had this to say: "True, the white man brought great change. But the varied fruits of his civilization, though highly colored and inviting, are sickening and deadening. And if it be the part of civilization to maim, rob and thwart, then what is progress?"

"I am going to venture that the man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures, and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization. And when native man left off this form of development, his humanization was retarded in growth ... And true civilization lies in the dominance of self and not in the dominance of other men ... Regarding the 'civilization' that has been thrust upon me since the days of reservation, it has not added one whit to my sense of justice; to my reverence for the rights of life; to my love for truth, honesty and generosity; nor to my faith in Wakan Tanka — God of the Lakotas. For after all the great religions have been preached and expounded, or have been revealed by brilliant scholars, or have been written in books and embellished in fine language with finer covers, man — all man — is still confronted with the Great Mystery." (pp. 249–58) Standing Bear was clear-headed enough to protest civilization without tying himself up in knots the way some of our more literal-minded primitivists do today. This pragmatic attitude about language made him a distant ally of Mohandas Gandhi, who when asked his opinion of western civilization, had the presence of mind to choose his words carefully, replying, "It would be a good idea."

For related reasons I find a recent article's attitude about civilization or lack of it to be refreshing. Writes Peter Porcupine in a fascinating article on the brief relationship between plottolders in Leeds and a squatter who took over one person's greenhouse, "Homage to Civility" (in *Here & Now*, issue 16/17): "It's unfortunate that the bourgeois triumphalists of the eighteenth century cornered the word 'civilization' to define their singularly uncivilized and ruthless social arrangements. By rubbishing the society of Native Americans, Scottish Highlanders or English commoners the idea of civilization became synonymous with capitalist society with its strong state, hierarchical social relations and production for profit, consumption for emulation. Other social arrangements were simply designated as barbaric despite the *civility* with which these other arrangements conducted themselves. There is a temptation to use the word 'community' to provide a positive term for human relationships which operate without coercion or manipulation, but there is a danger that it be used as an exclusive term defined by who is *in*, and who is *out* ... If community means just a democratic panopticon with everyone snooping on everyone else, then give me civility, an idea that respects the community without destroying the individual." One might suggest that Porcupine is also quibbling a bit over words, but the difference is that he is engaging real practical problems in and beyond an actual community, and his essay raises a series of questions in an undogmatic way. He does not become enslaved to a jargon. (*Here & Now* is available c/o Transmission Gallery, 28 King Street, Glasgow G1 5QP, Scotland.)

does not prescribe a politics; it must be interpreted, mediated through some theory of society in order to acquire political meaning.” In their joint introduction, Biehl and Staudenmaier note that “ecological ideas have a history of being distorted and placed in the service of reactionary ends — even of fascism itself.” Yet despite some useful insights and historical research (and Biehl’s painful exposure of Rudolf Bahro’s apparent total intellectual and political deterioration in her essay, “‘Ecology’ and the Modernization of Fascism in the German Ultra-Right”), this small book delivers equal doses of confusion and clarity. Staudenmaier begins his essay, “The ‘Green Wing’ of the Nazi Party and its Historical Antecedents,” by conceding that radicals often carelessly misuse “epithets like ‘fascist’ and ‘ecofascist,’ thus contributing to a sort of conceptual inflation that in no way furthers effective social critique.” Unfortunately, this book makes just such an error.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth repeating that in the U.S., ultra-rightism and fascism have mostly taken a militantly anthropocentric, pro-industrial development, “cornucopian” anti-population limitation expression (though a right-wing malthusian, anti-immigration movement also exists). In this country we have far less to worry over the kind of vegetarian hippy pagan deep ecologists this book implies are nascent fascists than we do from those hysterical property-rights hordes who (like the Nazi Party in its early days as a street-fighting, strike-breaking gang) are highly funded by corporate interests and mobilized against authentic grassroots groups. Except for a few fringe fascists who appropriate ecological rhetoric to a white racist biologism, the people we might meaningfully call “ecofascists” are more likely to crucify spotted owls, harass activists and plant bombs like the one meant to kill Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney.<sup>20</sup>

In Europe the problems raised by this book are more obvious. In two regions of France local leaders of the Green Party entered into an alliance with Jean Marie Le Pen’s fascist National Front, which calls itself “the only true ecological party” and demands political decentralization, nature preservation, and an end to nuclear power — and limits on immigration and the rights of resident aliens. This phenomenon is occurring throughout the continent. According to one anti-fascist researcher, many of the concerns of left and right coincide, such as grassroots localism, struggles against pollution, a sympathy for rural values and small-scale enterprise, and respect for nature. But race — the color line, which W.E.B. DuBois identified as “the problem of the twentieth century” — is the dividing line between ecologies. For right-wing environmentalists, according to journalist Mark Shapiro, “this means a hierarchical social order, with the races separated in their own niches of the globe”; for the mostly left and liberal environmentalists, “it usually means respect for the varied parts of shared ecosystems.”<sup>21</sup>

The Biehl-Staudenmaier book, however, is far too scattershot in its critique; it fails to draw the important distinction between apolitical sensibilities unprepared by their lack of social critique to resist fascism and an inferred fascist potential in these sensibilities themselves. Of course, Biehl’s associate Murray Bookchin is also notorious for accusing nearly anyone with whom he disagrees — from real right-wingers and potential ecofascists to liberal humanists, deep ecologists, christians, buddhists and radicals like this paper — of being “misanthropic” ecofascists. “[S]ome of the themes that Nazi ideologists articulated bear an uncomfortably close resemblance to themes familiar to ecologically concerned people today,” Biehl and Staudenmaier explain. Because right-wing ideologues today employ rhetoric emphasizing “the supremacy of the ‘Earth’ over people,” and perpetrate a “hi-jacking of ecology for

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<sup>19</sup> It’s an error — or perhaps a tactic — made repeatedly by Murray Bookchin. He writes in a typically poisonous and self-serving essay attacking deep ecologists, neo-luddites and neo-primitivists in the ecology movement, “At the risk of being provocative, albeit not accusatory, I must point out that nature mysticism permeated the thinking and avowals of the most murderous of the Nazi leaders ... Biocentrism appears in several pages of [Hitler’s] *Mein Kampf* ...” This passage, from Bookchin’s *Which Way for the Ecology Movement?* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1994, p. 8), is cited approvingly by the Neoists in *Green Apocalypse*. Of course, *saying* you’re not being accusatory doesn’t necessarily mean you aren’t. At any rate, the result is the same, as when Bookchin publicly denounces deep ecology as an ecofascist “cesspool” and the *Fifth Estate* critical luddism as part of a sinister “neo-Heideggerian reaction” with eco-fascist implications. If Nazis stumbled on ideas resembling green and deep ecological insights in any way, that is supposedly enough to discredit these insights — a logic which does not serve social ecology well, either, as my essay demonstrates below.

<sup>20</sup> For a list of such groups, see Carl Deal, *The Greenpeace Guide to Anti-environmental Organizations* (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1993) \$5 from Box 7776, Berkeley CA , 94707.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Shapiro, “Browns and Greens: Europe’s New Eco-Fascists,” *The Amicus Journal*, Winter 1992.

racist, nationalistic and fascist ends,” Biehl and Staudenmaier warn against mystical and antirational attitudes now “being intertwined with ecofascism.” But it never occurs to them that, like ecology, mysticism and other spiritual traditions might also be getting hi-jacked for purposes other than their actual intent. For Biehl and Staudenmaier, however, the mere act of any kind of sociobiological speculation or expression of cultural manifestations as diverse as sufism, zen, deep ecology, holistic nutrition, organic farming, vegetarianism, nature worship, or concern with holistic organicism, is a flag signaling potential ecofascism.

By their logic, of course, ecology itself is automatically and inherently suspect. Not only do “ecological ideas have a history of being distorted and placed in the service of highly regressive ends,” as they argue, ecology from its inception served to legitimate the racist and elitist rule of the European upper classes over both their own lower classes and the “colored races” in the colonies. It should come as no surprise that Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term “ecology,” was himself a reactionary racist, who (as Staudenmaier reports), laid the groundwork for Nazi racist pseudo-science and its murderous eugenics programs. Trapped within their political agenda, these social ecologists do not seem to understand such critical distinctions, and thus undermine their genuine insights. Staudenmaier not only attacks romanticism as implicitly fascistic (when in fact both left and right drew from the romantic movement), he worries about the “ideological overlap between nature conservation and National Socialism,” adding, “The Nazi state also created the first nature preserves in Europe.” That Nazi official Alwin Seifert (whose official title was “Reich Advocate for the Landscape”) “opposed monoculture, wetlands drainage and chemicalized agriculture” apparently makes all such opposition suspect. (At the same time, it should be mentioned, the marxist scientific rationalists in the Soviet Union were contemplating the liquidation of nature that could not be made to serve human ends.<sup>22</sup>)

Hitler, Staudenmaier says, “could sound like a veritable Green utopian, discussing authoritatively and in detail various renewable energy sources ... and declaring ‘water, winds and tides’ as the energy path to the future.” In fact, some Nazi rhetoric brings to mind even the language of eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin himself; *Reichsminister* Fritz Todt, for example, demanded that technology bring about “a harmony with nature and with the landscape, thereby fulfilling modern ecological principles of engineering as well as the ‘organological’ principles of his own era,” and Seifert insisted that work methods “more attuned with nature” be found — all language similar to Bookchin’s idea that human urban and agricultural infrastructures be tailored to fit their landscape, leaving only “a gentle, human imprint on nature,” encouraging a renewal of a “sense of oneness with nature that existed in humans from primordial times.”<sup>23</sup>

Biehl’s exposé of Rudolf Bahro is damning. Bahro, once an independent socialist dissident expelled from East Germany and then a provocative anti-industrial Green, now calls for a theocratic-ecological invisible world government, and argues that the ecology-peace movement must “redeem Hitler,” reclaim “the positive that may lie buried in the Nazi movement,” and “liberate” the “brown parts” in the German

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<sup>22</sup> In his *A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), Matt Cartmill writes, “Under Stalinism, official art and propaganda painted wild nature as an enemy of the working class, calling on all Soviet citizens to help tame the wilderness and make it serve the needs of the proletariat. Novels, paintings, and posters showed heroic Soviet workers damming rivers, draining marshes, felling forests, and dotting the tundra with factories. Every good Marxist was expected to support the struggle of ‘collectively organized reason against the elemental forces of nature.’ ‘Praise of nature,’ declared Maxim Gorky, ‘is praise of a despot.’” (pp. 218–19)

<sup>23</sup> See his *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1971) pp. 117–19. Ironically, in her recent book *Anarchism: Left, Right and Green* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994), German anarcho-syndicalist Ulrike Heider points to what she considers potentially fascistic aspects of Bookchin’s work — for example, references to “the blood that flows between the community and nature” (in *The Ecology of Freedom*), and other passages that, according to Heider, “especially in their German translation, have a frighteningly familiar ring.” Bookchin’s “theoretical proximity to the ideology of the *Volksgemeinschaft* cannot be overlooked.” (pp. 79, 64) For more on Bookchin’s fascism-mongering, see my *Beyond Bookchin: Preface to a Future Social Ecology* (Detroit and New York: Black & Red/Autonomedia, 1996), pp. 220–1. Since fascism colonizes anxieties rooted in real concerns, and (as Bookchin rightfully argues in *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* [San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987, pp. 244–5]), Nazism exploits only to abandon “the utopian content of ... popular yearning for a sense of place and community;” anyone can be accused of fascism for voicing such anxieties, concerns and utopian yearnings.

character, the “call in the depths of the *Volk* for a Green Adolf.” Bahro claims this would be “an entirely different Adolf” which Germans need in order to find their “roots, the roots from which will grow that which will save us.” Bahro’s tortured mysticism will likely win few converts to neofascism; it is probably unacceptable even to German rightists, who would not react well to his identification of the roots of the ecological crisis in the “sickness” of “white Nordic humanity.” He could even be arguing for a way to respond creatively to authentic concerns and utopian yearnings by integrating the dark side of human personality. But if he is, his views are so incoherent and obviously dangerous that they can sow only the most destructive whirlwind.

Yet none of this invalidates positive aspects of Bahro’s earlier work as a socialist dissident or his radical anti-industrial politics.<sup>24</sup> Nor is Bahro’s problem that is he mystical; it is rather the content and context of his mysticism, unless anti-ecofascist crusaders Biehl and Staudenmaier are prepared to argue that anarchist mystics like Gustav Landauer, Martin Buber, Dorothy Day and others were also by definition proto-fascists. As Staudenmaier recognizes, “Even the most laudable of causes can be perverted and instrumentalized in the service of criminal savagery.” Thus one can be a fascist vegetarian or a libertarian communist vegetarian, a revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist deep ecologist or an elitist, reactionary deep ecologist. I dare say one could even be a fascist social ecologist, everyone’s interpretation and self-definition being subjective, and grounds for an argument. Staudenmaier is wrong to imply that fascism can be detected simply in a defense of intuition or in the belief that humans should live according to some idea of natural order, or in the wish “to ‘reform society according to nature.’” After all, even social ecology claims to conform or respond to an idea of nature. Rather, fascism is identified by its authoritarian statist politics, its militarism, its nationalism and racial mystique. Religious rebels, we should remember, were among the most courageous and uncompromising opponents within Germany to the fascist regime, and many paid with their lives.<sup>25</sup>

## A narrow rationality

The Staudenmaier-Biehl argument tends to slide into a “Nazis liked organic farming therefore organic farming is potentially fascistic” schema. They are so suspicious of anything spiritual that Staudenmaier labels rightist (as if reactionaries were the only ones to express it) even the idea that modern technological society has “perpetrated not only the destruction of nature but an annihilation of the spirit,” and that “the destruction of nature ... is life-threatening in the spiritual sense as well as the physical ...” This notion may sometimes come from right-wing obscurantism, but it is also a valid phenomenological insight. Staudenmaier’s stiff dismissal of this idea smacks of the very rationalistic failure of the left in Germany to communicate with the authentic anxieties and psychic needs that the fascists exploited,

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<sup>24</sup> Bahro’s books, despite irregularities, are still valuable. See *Socialism and Survival* (London: Heretic Books, 1982), *From Red to Green* (London: Verso, 1984) and *Building the Green Movement* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986). See also his essay, “Who Can Stop the Apocalypse?” in the Spring 1991 *FE*.

<sup>25</sup> Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin themselves have written that simply because fascists have exploited ecology and people’s genuine alienation “does not, of course, make attention to these issues fascist.” They rightly recommend that ecological theorists and activists should “exercise extreme wariness as to how they use these ideas and the *context* in which they are placed,” and they point to racist anti-immigration propaganda couched in ecological terms as an example of their misuse. The point, and the example, are well-taken. But one needn’t be too terribly wary to notice a discrepancy between, on the one hand, a crude, inhuman, racist anti-immigration politics masked by scientific-ecological rationalizations, that tempts people to surrender the minimum ethical integrity, and, on the other hand, profound and poetic sensibilities like eco-mysticism, a biocentric ethic, and deep ecological expressions of the unity of life. Unfortunately, Bookchin and some of his associates have repeatedly slammed any and all manifestations of the latter as automatically “misanthropropic” and fascistic, thus undermining what good they might have done in raising the question of a political context. See “Ecofascism: Neither Left nor ‘Up Front’ but Far Right,” in *Green Perspectives*, Number 27, August 1992. Max Cafard’s “Bookchin Agonistes” (Summer 1997 *FE*) a review of Bookchin’s latest book (*Re-enchanting Humanity: A defense of the human spirit against anti-humanism, misanthropy, mysticism and primitivism*, 1995), gives a damning picture of the absurd excesses Bookchin commits in attacking and vilifying as proto-fascist anyone he disapproves of.

and which writers like Wilhelm Reich and Daniel Guerin have noted.<sup>26</sup> Yet Staudenmaier mentions in passing that there is no “inherent or inevitable connection between ecological issues and right-wing politics; alongside the reactionary tradition surveyed here, there has always been an equally vital heritage of left-libertarian ecology, in Germany as elsewhere.” This admission leads one to suspect that the relation of ecology to politics is far more complex than the scenario the authors present. Unfortunately they provide no accounting of this eco-radicalism.<sup>27</sup>

The question of technology — if I may be allowed a phrase once used by Heidegger without my being automatically smeared as a fascist — is equally ambiguous. Fascism both embraced and showed an aversion to modern technology and industrialism. As Jeffrey Herf has pointed out, “the German intellectual and cultural Right in Weimar and the Third Reich rejected much of political and cultural modernity, including Enlightenment rationality, while it embraced modern technology.” Explains Herf, “The high priest of cultural pessimism after World War I, Oswald Spengler, called for a priesthood of engineers to establish a technologically advanced authoritarian state. Ernst Juenger ... saw in technology a welcome authoritarian and totalitarian alternative to the fragmentation of bourgeois society, as well as a source of hope for Germany’s future international regeneration. Carl Schmitt and Hans Freyer saw in technology under state control a welcome alternative to the domination of the economy over society. Werner Combart juxtaposed German productive technology with Jewish parasitic capitalism ...” Typically (and sounding like certain social ecologists today), such ideologues “associated technology with an intrinsic aesthetic creativity, a clarity of form, and a use-value that they contrasted with the misuse of technology in an economy driven by exchange value. The Nazis incorporated many of these themes of the anticapitalist intellectual Right into their propaganda of a technologically modern German

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<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970); Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (1939; New York: Monad Press, 1973). Guerin describes socialism as “manifestly inferior” to fascism in winning converts, mainly for being “less a religion than a scientific conception. Therefore it appeals more to intelligence and reason than to the senses and the imagination.” Given the irrational aspects of stalinism and other leftist movements, with their demonology of enemy factions, worship of leaders, historical messianism and technolatriy, Guerin’s distinction is less than entirely credible. Moreover, he can only produce a naively instrumental recommendation for future resistance to fascism: “Doubtless, [the left’s] propaganda methods need to be rejuvenated and modernized,” he says. “Socialism should place itself more within the reach of the masses, and speak to them in clear and direct language that they will understand.” (pp. 73–4) While Guerin’s lack of creative response to this question is understandable for his time, our failure to unite reason and spirit will be less excusable.

Both Guerin and Reich (whom Joel Kovel has called “the most spiritual of psychoanalysts”), refer to the “mystical contagion” of fascism, but they identify this with statism, traditional religion, patriarchal values and nationalist-racist ideology. “Every form of mysticism is reactionary,” writes Reich, “and the reactionary man is mystical.”(p. 24) Yet he argues for a kind of organicism, and attacks both the church and “reactionary science” (p. 128), arguing that “machine civilization” has turned humanity, “fundamentally an animal,” into a robot. “In the construction of the machine, man followed the laws of mechanics and lifeless energy,” he says, and adds emphatically, “*The mechanistic view of life is a copy of mechanistic civilization.*” Their animal nature suppressed, human beings experience it in a distorted, supernatural or otherworldly way. (pp. 334–5, 344) Of course, Reich’s work suffers from mechanistic reductionism and a lack of nuance concerning the spectrum of experiences and ideas he categorizes as mystical. Reich’s notion that “Consciousness is only a small part of the psychic life” (p. 26), like Freud’s, reflects a mixture of respect for the non-rational and a narrow rationalist approach to it. Whatever his failings, nevertheless, he attempted to explore the underlying characterological sources of fascist hysteria in order to understand “what prevents the economic situation from coinciding with the psychic structure of the masses” (p. 14), a problem which remains unresolved today, but which cannot be fully resolved by a narrow atheistic rationalism or Reichian therapeutic-medical ideology. For Kovel’s remark on Reich, see his *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> As Alexander Cockburn observes in an essay discussing, among other related themes, the Nazis’ fascination with animal cruelty, vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, etc., “Animal-rights advocates and vegetarians often fidget under jeers that it was Nazis who banned vivisection. In fact vivisection continued during the Third Reich. The British journal *The Lancet* commented on the Nazis’ animal experimentation laws of 1933 that ‘it will be seen from the text of these regulations that those restrictions imposed [in Germany] follow rather closely those enforced in [England].’ The moral is not that there is something inherently Nazi-like in campaigning against vivisection or deploring the eating of animal meat or reviling the cruelties of the feedlot and the abattoir. The moral is that ideologies of nature imbued with corrupt race theory and a degraded romanticism can lead people up the wrong path, one whose terminus was an abattoir for ‘unhealthy’ humans, constructed as a reverse image of the death camp for (supposedly) healthy animals to be consumed by humans. For the Nazis their death camps were, in a way, romanticism’s revenge for the abattoirs and the hog-squeal of the universe [an allusion to Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*] echoing from the Union Stockyards in Chicago.” See “A Short, Meat-Oriented History of the World. From Eden to the Mattole,” in *New Left Review*, Number 215 (January-February 1996).

racial state that had burst the fetters on technological development — fetters, they argued, imposed by the ‘Jewish’ Weimar Republic.”

He elaborates, “Exponents of traditional anti-technological views did find a place in the Nazi hierarchy. Racism did draw on antiurban, agrarian, preindustrial utopias. But enough of the leading intellectual and political figures of the movement, party, and regime embraced ideas similar to [the totalitarian-traditionalist yet pro-technology] reactionary modernism to justify a revision of our view of Nazism as a movement driven by ideological hostility to technology.” In fact, “By 1939 the Nazis were claiming that the terrible effects of technology had been corrected by the National Socialist revolution of 1933. The official view of technology was anything but pessimistic and Goebbels himself went to great lengths to denounce technological pessimism as a legacy of ‘bourgeois reaction’ which could not grasp the rhythms and ‘hot impulses’ of the *stahlernde Romantik* of the twentieth century.” When a romantic technological pessimism returned to German politics, Herf adds, “it did so on the Left rather than the Right.”<sup>28</sup>

In fact, outside of its basic authoritarian program, fascist demagoguery has varied according to its needs. Fascists employed as much socialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric as ecology in their attempt to gain followers. No one would argue that this makes talk of socialism a sign of potential fascism. Context matters. Nazi agitator Gregor Strasser employed a nationalist and socialist mix in his propaganda, attacking “international finance capital [which] means the end of all possibility of social liberation ... the end of all dreams of a socialist Germany.” The Nazi cadres, he said, were “ardent socialists ... waging the fight against capitalism and imperialism incarnated in the Versailles treaty ...” The Nazi Party, according to Daniel Guerin, “supported extensive movements for labor demands. For instance, in October, 1930, it supported the strike of the Berlin metal workers, in which 100,000 workers took part. In November, 1932, it, together with the communists, instigated the Berlin transport strike.” In Italy, the fascists won peasants to their cause by demanding “land for those who till it.”<sup>29</sup>

Bookchin, Biehl et al also make much of a fascist holistic organicism, but in fact the appeal of organicism was understandably widespread as industrialism expanded into every sphere of life, bringing with it social dislocation, disasters, and mass displacement of populations. The organicism and holism of figures such as Lewis Mumford, Siegfried Giedion and Aldo Leopold could hardly be called expressions of fascism. Fascism responds to and exploits authentic sensibilities for its own purposes; people susceptible to authoritarianism and racist dehumanization of various others are sometimes won to fascism by organicist arguments and sensibilities, sometimes by the worship of modernization and industrial technology’s prowess.<sup>30</sup>

The narrow rationality exemplified in Biehl’s and Staudenmaier’s text, and their lack of distinction between the opportunistic exploitation by rightists of ecological concerns and sensibilities, and the causes and concerns themselves, turns a potentially important work into a mixture of insight and sectarian folly. We undermine our capacity to expose and neutralize fascist ecomysticism when we label all ecomysticism as fascist; we surrender the terrain to fascist and authoritarian spiritual obscurantism by failing to comprehend the deep human need to embrace spirit. As Joel Kovel has argued eloquently, spirituality is not simply a false or alienated response to class oppression but is rooted ontologically in

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “Belated Pessimism: Technology and Twentieth Century German Conservative Intellectuals,” in *Technology, Pessimism, and Modernism*, edited by Yaron Ezrahi et al, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 115–36. See also Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1984). I thank Allan Antliff for pointing out Herf’s work to me.

<sup>29</sup> Guerin, *ibid.*, pp. 79, 98, 53. Guerin speaks of other forms of fascist “mysticism,” including the cult of youth and the cult of the dead and fallen heroes. But these cults can also be found in working class leftist and anarchist movements, too, as anyone who sees the newsreel of Durruti’s funeral will notice. The cult of the dead probably goes back to the neanderthals, after all! Even the pseudo-classic and art deco aesthetic in fascist art can also be discerned in socialist and anarchist posters.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the basic themes of the Italian Futurists, many of whom were won over to Mussolini, were established by the movement’s leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in *The Futurist Manifesto*. Jane Rye summarizes them as “the exaltation of speed, youth and action; of violence and conflict; rebellion against the past and disgust with the stagnation of Italian culture; a passionate enthusiasm for the beauties of the industrial age.” See Rye’s *Futurism* (New York and London: Dutton, 1972), p. 11.



human being itself — in “the general predicament of our species: general discontinuity with the rest of being,” and “the opaque mystery of consciousness.” It is powerful because it is an “interrogation of being from the standpoint of nonbeing [with] no discrete answer to the interrogation and therefore no prescribed spirituality...”

Spirituality cannot be explained away as “irrational” and alienated pseudo-consciousness. “Undoubtedly official religion alienated the essence of spirituality as a way of enforcing subservience to temporal power. But something had to be there in order to be alienated.” Kovel argues that we are not therefore left to make an Augustinian leap of absurd faith: “For while there can be no positive proof of the independent existence of the spirit realm, and therefore no ‘spiritual science’ as such, we are still able to say whether the dimension of spirituality makes human existence as a whole more coherent. We are still able to think about whether human beings are more intelligible, more fully themselves, when considered spiritually or through the lens of despiritualization; and whether history becomes more intelligible, whether the ceaseless struggle of classes, the fitful march of progress, the astounding and horrific abyss over which history teeters, all become clearer.”<sup>31</sup> When we tar as “atavistic” and potentially fascistic people’s natural reaction against the alienating and spirit-destroying nature of mass technics, we surrender this deeply reasonable impulse to fascist demagogues who will one day decry technology’s horrors and the next proclaim its glorious destiny. Thus in a sense we commit the same narrowly rationalistic errors made by earlier anti-fascists.

Biehl and Staudenmaier claim to “see the roots of the present ecological crisis in an irrational society — not in the biological makeup of human beings, nor in a particular religion, nor in reason, science or technology.” “At the heart of the *völkisch* temptation was a pathological response to modernity,” Staudenmaier writes. It never occurs to them to ask where the irrationality of an irrational society comes from, or to consider the pathology of modernity itself. Sixty years after the failure of Guerin’s analysis to grapple adequately with the otherness of the irrational, they insist they “uphold the importance of reason, science and technology in creating both a progressive ecological movement and an ecological society.” They never reflect on the fundamental irrationality of this society’s “reason, science and technology,” and why people rightfully mistrust them, turning instead to various forms of spirituality and intuition, be they liberatory and humanizing, or repressive and dehumanizing. Upholding rationality and science to rescue ecology from potential fascism, they don’t notice that right-wing objectivist rationalists similarly employ scientific rationalism to oppose even the mildest environmental reform.

In the early 1970s, a leftist group steeped in a rationalist, materialist doctrine — one in some ways more sophisticated than those of many other such leftist groups in its appeal to a broad left tradition beyond simplistic leninism — published provocative social critiques of the counter-culture and the budding environmental movement as having parallels to and even intellectual roots in fascism. According to this group, the anti-technology sensibility, with its respect for labor-intensive farming and similar approaches, was mere mystification for a deepening capitalist austerity similar to the Nazi “strength-through-joy” ideology. Glorification of “Nature” (always in quotes) as a supreme value was a religious obscurantism that lined up hippy environmentalists with the supposedly proto-nazi German *wandervogel* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group posed a rational scientific alternative steeped in Hegel, Marx and Luxemburg, noting the resemblance of anarchist (lifestyle anarchist?) rhetoric to “Mussolini’s anti-Marxist demagoguery ...” Anarchism, they argued, “because it is the extreme political expression of bourgeois individualism inevitably gives birth to fascism ... The rock-drug ‘counter’-culture, ideological expression of anarchism, is likewise merely a particularly vicious extension of previously existing bourgeois cultural trends.”

Like Staudenmaier and Biehl, this organization was careful to deny that all expressions of rock or other counter-culture manifestations were automatically fascist. Nevertheless, one editorialist continued, “The world view implicit in that culture, if extended, would lead to specific social relations. The world-

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<sup>31</sup> Kovel, *ibid.*, pp. 72–5, 83, 8, 69–70. He adds that a spirituality perspective “does not deny any of the findings of science ... It simply says that these findings, the ‘nonspiritual spirit of things spiritual,’ if you will, are a backdrop to the encounter with nonbeing which is the ‘spirit of spirituality’ itself.”

view of the rock culture is a return to a state of animality and a celebration of barbarism under the guise of ‘liberation.’ It is no more than the symbolic celebration of the monstrously inhuman existence that capitalism has created ...” This group published excerpts from Guerin on proto-fascist youth counter-cultures in pre-Nazi Germany, along with graphics from 1920s and 1930s Germany and the 1960s showing strikingly similar pagan motifs. This decadent irrationality had to be fought, and was even rampant among the left. “Purely phenomenal perception,” argued the theoretical journal of this group, “deliberately avoiding the development of critical awareness, leaves people in a state of helplessness in which they will submit to any onslaught, including fascism, which emerges as a social force.”

In its clarion defense of rationality against dangerous irrationality, and in its epistemological determinism, this warning against proto-fascist tendencies seems only a slightly more marxist version of Bookchin’s *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* and other social ecology texts decrying deep ecology misanthropes and ecofascists.<sup>32</sup> Of course, this earlier display of militant antifascism, the National Caucus of Labor Committees, soon began a campaign of vicious physical assault against various rival leftist groups in 1973 before going on to reconstitute itself, under the leadership of Lyndon LaRouche, as the U.S. Labor Party — a genuine fascist group if there ever was one. Thus the defense of rationality spawned extreme and violent irrationality, and anti-fascism became, as the Neoists like to point out, not potential but *actual* fascism.<sup>33</sup>

## Remembering our limits

One can understand Biehl’s and Staudenmaier’s reasons for publishing their essays on the potential and actual colonization of ecological sensibilities by fascists. The parallels between Weimar German culture and fascist ideological motifs, and aspects of contemporary culture and ideology are striking.<sup>34</sup> Since the Second World War, fascism has persisted throughout the world in forms both classic and new, and is growing, while what is valuable in socialism and the anti-capitalist tradition has been rolled back by the New World Order, along with state socialism and most of the authoritarian left. Their book at least raises issues it cannot adequately clarify about the disturbing connections between dangerous ideologies and our cherished ecological sensibilities. Given the capacity of authoritarian movements (left and right) to capture our love of nature and desire for community, our alienation from the modern world and our desire for justice, we cannot presume we are invulnerable to political despair and authoritarian reaction.

This is not because spirituality, or zen, or sufism, or vegetarianism, or any belief in natural law, or ecocentric ideas, or a respect for traditional rural communities, or even misanthropy is intrinsically fascist or any more fascist than rationalism, loyalty to science or marxian dialectics. Any belief or sensibility can become fascistic — context matters. After all, the “religion of nature” embraced by the Nazis claimed both spirit and hard science. It also mixed truth with fantasy. In his book *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, Robert A. Pois quotes Hitler’s comment, “At the end of the last century the progress of science and technique led liberalism astray into proclaiming man’s mastery of nature and announcing that he would soon have dominion over space. But a simple storm is enough

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<sup>32</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> The undated fall double issue of the NCLC journal, *The Campaigner*, was probably published in 1972. On the U.S. Labor Party, see “Bozos on Parade: The Frenzied Case of Lyn Marcus,” by Robert Solomon, in *Fli-Back: A Journal of Cheap Shots* (Detroit, February 1976); *NCLC: Brownshirts of the Seventies* (Terrorist Information Project/Counterspy), and “The Strange Odyssey of Lyndon LaRouche,” by Frank Donner and Randall Rothenberg, in *The Nation*, August 16–23, 1980.

<sup>34</sup> An early essay on such parallels, John de Graaf’s “The Dangers of Counterculture,” was published in the March-April 1976 *North Country Anvil*, and later revised and reprinted in the Fall 1977 *CoEvolution Quarterly* under the title, “The Wandervogel.” Later, De Graaf reviewed his discussion in an article for the Winter 1980 Chicago newspaper *Heartland* in an essay, “From Flower Power to Fascism.” De Graaf’s view, it should be noted, was not that the essentially pacifist and internationalist German counter-culture was fascist, but that the green counter-culture alone was incapable of stopping fascism. A left liberal himself, De Graaf argued that a “convergence of counterculture and left political tendencies” was necessary, and saw signs of hope in the ecology and anti-nuclear movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

— and everything collapses like a pack of cards.” Pois observes that “this statement, which obviously has more than a grain of truth in it,” sounds “remarkably like contemporary environmentalists.” Of course, not fascism but common sense reminds us that nature strikes back. Nor is it proto-fascist to treat with acerbic skepticism scientists’ bland reassurances that the catastrophes brought about by urban-industrialism can be managed.

Pois argues that relatively little attention has been paid to German fascist attitudes about nature at least in part because “in certain crucial aspects, National Socialism was very much in the mainstream not only of German but of *Western* philosophical and religious developments.” The Nazi world view “embodied within it elements that have existed as Western civilization’s alter-ego from time to time” — not only its violent messianism, but perhaps more importantly the anxiety about humanity’s inescapable differentiation which leads people to seek a way to be *in* or *of* nature. According to Pois, “This approach is one that has not been confined to woebegone romantics in full flight from modernity ... but began with the crude scientism of the Enlightenment.” Enlightenment natural science itself began the process which rooted human beings in nature as “just one species among many” (the phrase which causes social ecologists to reach for their revolvers), while at the same time ranking people for the purposes of social domination. The rise of nationalism and reactionary racial myths intertwined with mystical demagoguery and scientific rationalism contributed both to late-nineteenth century imperialist rationales and to twentieth century fascism.

“Though for the most part eschewing notions of race and racial supremacy, modern environmental concerns are in part rooted in this general tradition,” avers Pois. But he adds an important qualification: “As we have seen, National Socialist ideologues were in no small way concerned that man, or at least some men, live in harmony with the environment and, appreciating the fact that this is obviously necessary, we must recognize that just because something happens to have been emphasized by people as despicable as the Nazis does not make it wrong. Man is, at least in part, rooted in the natural world, a world too often viewed as being a simple object for exploitation. In their own version of the ‘natural religion,’ however, their *Lebensphilosophie*, the National Socialists exemplified a pernicious tendency that must be of special concern for anyone who chooses to see man as a product of some deified nature, and nothing more than that.”<sup>35</sup>

*And nothing more than that* — the key idea in the last line. The Nazis practiced one version of nature religion, not the only one. (Goethe practiced another. So did Standing Bear.) Perhaps just as a more organic, deeper notion of reason requires continual self-examination along the blurred line between critical rationality and diverse modes of intuitive extra-rationality, our ecological politics might think of humanity as both only a single leaf on nature’s tree *and something more than that*. In their own hideous way, the Nazis themselves are proof of human uniqueness, though we can find far more worthy examples. The problem with their claim to a non-anthropocentric view was not so much its lack of scientific “objectivity” or “rationality” but its lack of humanity, which, interestingly, is to a great degree a question of spiritual and intuitive sensibilities. Like that of the misanthropes whom the *Fifth Estate* debated in the late 1980s, Nazi misanthropy was highly selective. And their pseudo-naturalism was a racist cult based on exclusion, conflict and cruelty — exclusion, conflict and cruelty they were willing to perpetrate on others. Similarly, the difference between, say, organic farming motivated by some sense of spiritual connection to the soil and organic farming for the sake of some exclusive “fatherland” should be easy enough to discern. We should be able to identify such ideas when we encounter them, *and learn how to deal with them*, without having to resort to a rationalism that ends up legitimating that other fascism, that other fatherland: liberal democratic capitalist (or promethean leftist, if you like) progress with its ultimate totalitarianism of a bioengineered technopolis.

It also helps to remember the limits of our theories, to remember that our ideas about nature must always be considered in light of what they say about our obligations to the human community and what kind of social relations they imply. As Langdon Winner has put it, “Nature will justify anything.

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<sup>35</sup> Robert A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), pp. 34–63.

Its text contains opportunities for myriad interpretations. The patterns noticed in natural phenomena and the meanings given them are all matters of choice ... It is comforting to assume that nature has somehow been enlisted on our side. But we are not entitled to that assumption.”<sup>36</sup> Green anarchists, deep ecologists, social ecologists and the rest of us have all been guilty of that error to one degree or another. We all need to tread carefully, mindful of our world and the world we say we desire.

## 4. Down the vortex

And so I’ve now gone down the ideological vortex, too, I’m afraid, in some cases arguing obscurely with people I might have ignored and by whom I might have perhaps been thankfully ignored as well. I’ve been wrestling with a tar baby. But not for very much longer. I began this essay-review out of a sense of responsibility to a radical green movement that takes the ideas printed in this paper seriously. I felt a perhaps quixotic need to avoid being misunderstood, and to examine how my ideas have evolved so as to prevent them from becoming a species of bad faith, the kind in which our earlier ideas persist in gnawing at the tail of our thoughts today. John Moore might understand this, interested as he is in the phenomenon of ecdysis, or the shedding of the skin. As Nietzsche commented in *The Dawn*, “The snake that cannot shed its skin perishes. So do the spirits who are prevented from changing their opinions, they cease to be spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

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). “The concept of the primitive is as old as civilization,” writes Diamond, “because civilized men have always and everywhere been compelled by the conditions of their existence to try to understand their roots and human possibilities.” “The search for the primitive,” he says in another context, “is the attempt to define a primary human potential. Without such a model (or, since we are dealing with men and not things, without such a vision), it becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate or understand our contemporary pathology and possibilities.” For example, he explains, unless we work to rediscover “the nature of human nature,” medical science may survive (and, one must assume, in the form of a bioengineered nightmare world), “but the art of healing will wither away. For healing flows from insight into primary, ‘pre-civilized’ human processes; it presumes a knowledge of the primitive, a sense of the minimally human, a sense of what is essential to being human.”

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<sup>36</sup> Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> See John Moore’s *Anarchy & Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days* (London: Aporia Press, 1988), available from FE Books. For the Nietzsche citation, see *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufman (1954; New York: Viking/Penguin, 1978), p. 92.27.

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). Such an impulse is both conservative and deeply radical, as Diamond argues, representing as it does “a form of neo-primitivist striving, proclaiming the sacredness of life, communal forms of society, the aesthetic dimension of human nature, the continuity with nature at large and culture as ritual.” Thus a redefined idea of “progress” would become more like the notion in aboriginal tribal societies, “a metaphor for spiritual transformation,” and thus also “in part, a primitive return; a reformulation of old impulses in new situations and social structures.” Let us also add, a process of healing.

The social and historical critique of empire, state, megamachine, monoculture, and the ideology of progress — “the basic apology for imperialism,” as Diamond calls it, no longer a religion or a mere dogma but a compulsion — requires theoretical insight and an attentiveness to fundamental human intuitions.<sup>38</sup> But even indigenous peoples with a living memory of primal lifeways cannot any longer avoid negotiating much of the same terrain detribalized peoples face. A movement which attempts to reduce primitive insights into an ideology or strategy risks becoming a caricature of its own best instincts. Better to put our collective shoulder to the wheel we face, not chase phantoms. As Lévi-Strauss writes in *Tristes Tropiques*, “The sources of strength on which our remote ancestors drew are present also in ourselves,” and he adds, quoting Rousseau: “The golden age which blind superstition situated behind or ahead of us is in us.”<sup>39</sup>

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.

March-April 1997

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<sup>38</sup> Diamond, *ibid.*, pp. 203, 119, 356, 40, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955; New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 392.



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David Watson  
Swamp Fever, Primitivism & the “Ideological Vortex”: Farewell to All That  
1997

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