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# The State of Nature: The Political Philosophy of Primitivism and the Culture of Contamination

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## ABSTRACT

The 'state of nature' could be understood in two senses; both in terms of its nature's current (sorry) condition and of that unmediated and pre-contractual relation between humanity and the environment posited by political philosophers like Locke and Rousseau and now championed by anarcho-primitivism. Primitivism is easily dismissed as an extreme, naïve and impractical form of radical environmentalism but its emergence signifies contemporary disaffection with the ideology of 'progress' so central to modernity and capitalism. This paper offers an ethico-political interpretation of primitivism's critical relation to modernity in terms of the dialectic between amorality (innocence) and immorality (guilt) within what is characterised as modernity's 'culture of contamination'.

## KEYWORDS

State of Nature, primitivism, Locke, radical environmentalism, culture of contamination

## INTRODUCTION

To understand Political Power right, and derive it from its Original, we must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a *State of perfect freedom* to order their Actions and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man. (Locke, 1988: 269)

The philosophers, who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there. (Rousseau, 1986: 50)

Despite its wholesale orientation towards the future modernity has still looked to the past to explain, justify or critique the contemporary 'order of things'. For modernity's early political theorists the crucial point of origin and difference was that 'state of nature' which existed prior to, and could be compared and contrasted with, their own ideal of civil(ised) society. Since the purpose of such theories was to elucidate culturally binding principles of *governance* and *moral law* the state of nature was almost always envisaged as an anarchic and amoral realm. It was a 'state of perfect freedom' where human nature was fully expressed and as yet unconstrained by socio-political conventions. The exact manner in which this pre-historic existence was envisaged depended upon the particular theorists' tendency toward an optimistic or pessimistic assessment of human nature and human society. Thus for Hobbes this anarchic state was famously characterised by 'continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes, 1960: 82). For Rousseau, driven as much by pessimism about the parlous state of his contemporaries as optimism about human nature, this primitive anarchism had distinct advantages. Life was (generally) marked by individual isolation, indolence, robust health and heart's ease because the 'produce of the earth furnished him with all he needed, and instinct told him how to use it' (Rousseau, 1986: 84).<sup>1</sup>

Optimist and pessimist alike agreed that civilisation was to be defined in terms of this distinction between nature and culture and by the movement of the latter away from the former. Humanity was driven to distinguish and distance itself from its previously animal-like existence, something that could only be achieved through hard work and the employment of that unique human faculty 'reason'. The 'irrational' anarchism characteristic of the 'state of nature' was superseded, whether from necessity or choice, by a rational agreement, a 'social contract'. This contract was an agreement to enter into the moral and political order of civilisation, to limit one's inherent freedoms and control one's inherent nature in the name of reason and social progress.

This then is modernity's key foundational narrative. It has been employed in numerous ways and to justify diverse political ends, from monarchism to regicide, but its ontological status remains ambiguous. For Locke the 'state of nature' was a historical and geographical reality, a matter of established fact, 'the world never was, nor ever will be, without Numbers of Men in that State' (Locke, 1988: 276). For Rousseau it 'perhaps never did, and probably never will exist' (Rousseau, 1986: 44). But whatever its ontological status, its ideological effects were real enough and all theorists alike were happy to introduce the current conditions of those peoples they regarded as either 'civilised' or 'primitive' as

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evidence for their contrasting speculations. What is clear is that Rousseau remained in a minority, the dominant ideological perspective of modernism has always regarded this divisive yet 'civilising' movement away from nature in an entirely positive light. It is, after all, what constitutes progress. Perhaps then it is not surprising that this progressive 'just so story' has also been pressed into service on numerous occasions to justify the 'brutal' treatment of that which is deemed 'primitive'. John Locke himself had financial interests in the slave trade.

Locke's own version of this story mentions three critical moments, which mark stages in the change from a state of nature to that of civil society. The first is the appropriation of nature transforming it from God's common gift to humankind to personal property; the second is the invention of money, the third the social contract itself. In the first instance nature is altered through the admixture of human labour. Since the 'Labour of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands we may say, are properly his [individual property]. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State of Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*' (Locke, 1988: 288). Nature thus becomes parcelled up, wilderness becomes tamed, domesticated, transformed and owned through individual labour. (Though even Locke might be thought politically and ecologically astute enough to add the proviso that this holds true only where there is 'enough, and as good left in common for others' (288).) Labour has 'put a distinction between' the commonality of natural objects and personal property, it has 'added something to them more than Nature' (288). In instrumental terms this addition is also a necessary improvement 'without which the common is no use' (289). It is however ironic that Locke, so familiar from his Puritan upbringing with the bible's Edenic narratives, should chose to illustrate his case *for* private property with the example of picking apples.

The invention of money allows a second qualitative change to take place, because it marks both the beginning of the commodification of nature and the introduction of a hierarchical social organisation. Originally, the extent of an individual's personal property was limited by their labour power, by the amount of land it was physically possible for them to make use of, which 'did confine every Man's *Possession*, to a very moderate Proportion' (292). But 'the *Invention of Money*, and the tacit Agreement of Men to put a value on it, introduced (by Consent) larger Possessions, and a Right to them' (293). Money, unlike nature's products, does not spoil, it can be stored and accumulated indefinitely and so if people consent to take money 'in exchange for the truly useful, but perishable Supports of Life' (301) then by default they have 'agreed to disproportionate and unequal Possession of the Earth' (302). Ironically then, from Locke's perspective, civil(ised) society arises out of the need to protect inequalities. There is little point in stealing others' perishable property if one already has all one can use, but money provides an imperishable motive. And so people 'sign up' to the social contract. They agree to give up their natural freedoms and to

submit to the authority of 'a common establish'd Law and Judicature ... with Authority to decide Controversies between them, and punish Offenders' (324). This contract is, Locke makes plain, the final and most important aspect demarcating civil society from the state of nature.

Whether one calls this political philosophy or merely regards it as the manufacture of a modernist myth, Locke clearly spells out the key elements that are taken to distinguish civil(ised) society: first, and most importantly, the transformation of nature by the admixture of human labour; second, the commodification of nature and human labour through its symbolic incorporation in a monetary economy (clearly vital for a nascent capitalism); and third, the development of a hierarchical social organisation and that rational political/legal authority necessary to maintain and secure the conditions necessary for the reproduction of civil society over time. There is also another, less explicit, element here, a moral expectation best described as a 'work ethic'. Since it is human labour that improves (adds to) nature then productive labour becomes a moral duty of civilisation's citizens, idleness and unemployment a sin. These mutually supportive and interacting elements constitute the necessary conditions for the ongoing trajectory of progress, for leaving the state of nature further and further behind. Perhaps all Locke really overlooked was the extent to which that other instrumentally directed facet of human reason, the scientific knowledge and technology that can convert mere industriousness into actual industries, would become so important.<sup>2</sup>

As Kurt Vonnegut might say 'so it goes' (Vonnegut, 1969). Triumphant in its war against all forms of traditionalism, the centuries following Locke see 'progress' roll hopefully onward, a juggernaut that crushes those that fall beneath its wheels. Its accompanying and increasingly dominant ideology pervades every aspect of our life. Most people don't question the need to continue transforming nature, to make more money, experiment further, enact more laws or work harder. 'Progress' comes to operate, like all ideology, largely 'behind our backs', hardly entering consciousness but still ensuring our 'interpellation' into an ever more complex, expansive, and self-referential civil society (Althusser, 1993). And, of course, progress can only do this because the civilisation with which it is associated seems to have delivered certain material benefits, to have fulfilled certain needs (even if many of those needs were first created by those with vested interests in their fulfilment). Thus, as Marcuse argues, a 'comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom predominates in industrial civilisation, a token of technical progress' (Marcuse, 1991:1). This is not to say that 'progress' always proceeds smoothly and without opposition, but to point out that it is only when *things go wrong*, fail to meet expectations, or run into unexpected opposition that a society's ideological presuppositions are brought to full consciousness. Such problems require those wishing to retain the status quo to formulate and defend what had been an implicit social doxa as an explicit orthodoxy. Once codified, this orthodoxy can and will be opposed by heterodox

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critiques. In the modern world the ideology of progress had become second nature to us but it is only 'when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of its natural or conventional character ... of social facts can be posed (Bourdieu, 1991: 169).

Radicals, including anarchists and radical environmentalists, have always attempted to fracture the aura of inevitability that helps obscure the origins and actualities of the modern state and capitalism. They reject any orthodoxy that seeks to justify hierarchy and authority. They point out that the state and its philosophers, having retrospectively sold us a social contract we never saw nor signed, seem anyway to have reneged on their side of the bargain which was to protect our lives and liberties. The new institutionally guaranteed 'freedoms', to democracy, free speech, individual liberty, so dearly brought, constantly fail to live up to expectations. What does it mean to have political freedom when the parties on offer are ideologically identical clones? What kind of intellectual freedom is it that brands all those who dare to think differently dangerous extremists? What kind of individuality expects us all to conform within such narrow limits? What freedoms are even possible when the very air we breathe is poisoned and the food we eat contaminated with the so-called 'by-products' of progress? In such circumstances it is surely not surprising that some might choose the dream of a pre-contractual state of natural innocence to the increasingly nightmarish 'reality' of Locke's post-contractual culture.

## ANARCHO-PRIMITIVISM AND THE CULTURE OF CONTAMINATION

When we say we want green anarchy, a stateless society, free and in harmony with Nature, people tell us that it's a nice dream but it'll never happen' as 'it's against human nature'. The point is that it *has* happened – green anarchy was how *all* people lived for a good 90% of history ... how some *still* live better than we do today. When we point this out, people start pissing and whining about 'going back to the caves' and getting protective about their TV's, cars and other fruits of 'Progress', particularly Lefties and 'anarchists' who don't know the difference and who think 'Progress' is some inevitable law of Nature and not part and parcel of State society and the self-serving elites ruling it. We'll demolish those myths ... (Anon n.d. *Green Anarchist*)

Life was better before sliced bread. (Luddites On-Line)

Primitivism, is, as the anonymous writer in *Green Anarchist* admits, clearly a marginal political perspective even within leftist and anarchist circles. Its call for the destruction or dismantling of civilisation is about as extreme and comprehen-

sive a solution to current environmental problems as it is possible to imagine. (Although some associated with primitivism have also been accused of harbouring even more extreme Malthusian tendencies that might regard humanity itself, not just civilisation, as the source of our environmental problems (Blissett and Home, n.d.).) The explicitly primitivist strand in environmental anarchism has coalesced since the early 1980s around journals like *Fifth Estate*, *Green Anarchist* and *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and the writings of Fredy Perlman (1983) and John Zerzan (1994, 1999) amongst others. While those associated with primitivism hold a variety of perspectives, and often question or even eschew the label 'primitivism',<sup>3</sup> their arguments share a family resemblance in terms of their fundamental critiques of civilisation and technology, which are regarded as instigating and perpetuating both social inequalities and the environmental crisis. Thus 'George Bradford' (of *Fifth Estate*) claims that there 'a growing recognition that the environmental crisis is the crisis of a civilisation destructive in its essence to nature and humanity' (Bradford, 1989: 3).

It would be relatively easy to delineate a rather narrow or exclusive notion of primitivism that set it in some kind of absolute opposition to other forms of radical environmentalism and ecological anarchism like the deep ecological vision of many in Earth First! or Murray Bookchin's 'social ecology'. Certainly it often seems from the intensity of the debates between adherents of these positions (and a thousand others), and the personal invective that abounds, that there can be little common ground between them (see for example Zerzan, 1994: 164–6). But this would be a mistake because while the debates of the late 1980's and early 1990s over biological reductionism, population control, nature mysticism, and so on, are by no means resolved there are broader similarities in their analysis of our current situation (Bradford, 1989; Bookchin & Foreman, 1991). One way of characterising these similarities might be in terms of the depth of their critique of the ideology of 'progress' and the degree to which they reject what I will term our 'culture of contamination'. The differences between these varieties of radical environmentalism can be characterised in terms of their analysis of and responses to what they regard as this contaminating culture.

From the perspective of radical ecology modern society is inherently, rather than accidentally, a culture of contamination. The oil slicks that polluted Puget sound, the clouds of radioactivity released from Chernobyl, devastating mudslides from deforested hillsides, the ozone hole, global warming, asthmatic smogs, and so on, are accidental only in the very trivial sense that they were not (usually) the intended consequences of the social activities concerned. These events, though often unforeseen, are by no means accidental 'by-products' of modernity but a necessary and inevitable corollary of modern modes of production. 'Progress' is powered by and requires that society continually, and on an ever increasing scale, transform everything with which it comes into contact, that it leave nothing untouched, that it makes of everything something that it previously was not.

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Progress necessitates the constant re-ordering and re-configuration of the world about us and since we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent it is *inevitable* that such changes will have unforeseen or unwanted consequences. The greater the scale of our interventions the more such consequences proliferate and interact and since modernity is now a global phenomenon so too the effects have become world-wide. This globalisation of unforeseen consequences 'systematically produced as a part of modernisation' is, of course, the basic premise of those who now refer to modernity as a risk society (Beck, 1992: 19).<sup>4</sup>

The modernist tendency is to refer only to the *unintended* consequences of modernity as contaminating. The oil slick is regarded as polluting because in Mary Douglas' (1991) terminology it is 'matter out of place'. It has escaped the bounds of the tankers' holds that were meant to contain it and flowed beyond its culturally determined place into that realm which modernity has defined as its Other, that is, nature (Plumwood, 1993; Thompson, 1990). Many environmentalists might go further and see this in Durkheimian terms as a form of sacrilege, as a profane encroachment on what they regard as a sacred realm (Durkheim, 1968; Eliade, 1987). But, if the analysis presented above is correct, then such profanities are not accidental but part and parcel of progress itself. Modernity is a culture of contamination since, as social theorists from Weber onwards have argued, modernity eventually leaves nothing as sacred or sacrosanct, everything becomes disenchanting, a mere means to continuously shifting ends (Smith, 2001). (Although of course 'progress' too can declaim itself in terms of a discourse of purification or even Puritanism, namely as dispelling the contaminating impurities of a base nature in order to reach a 'higher' plane.) And in one sense this brings us back to Locke, who, as we have seen, regards modern civilisation as dependent upon the transformation of nature via human labour. This transformation makes nature useful for humanity and, one might add, simultaneously transforms nature into use-value. The first step towards a civilised society entails making nature a mere resource, what Heidegger refers to as a 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*) (Heidegger, 1993: 322). The second moment of this transformation then appears with the arrival of money and (in Marx's terms) the commodification of nature whereby it is further transformed from use-value to exchange-value. In other words the 'state of nature' is dissolved in the acid-bath of progress and replaced by the 'real-world' of contemporary capitalism.

This process has occurred on such a scale and reached such a state in late modernity that it now seems that all nature has been reduced to its use or exchange value, that there is no nature that has not been transformed and contaminated in some way. In Bill McKibben's best selling words, we may have witnessed *The End of Nature* (McKibben, 1990). No where on, above, or below the Earth's surface remains in its 'pristine' state, everywhere is affected. DDT and nuclear fallout are found even in Antarctica's uninhabited wastelands, acid rain drips from mountain trees into near lifeless pools; the oceans are trawled and



their depths riven by military sonar that shatter the eardrums of its mammalian inhabitants (Norton-Taylor, 2001). As Lefebvre points out, although nature 'obsesses us, as do childhood and spontaneity, via the filter of memory ... everything conspires to harm it. The fact is that natural space will soon be lost from view. ... Nature is also becoming lost to thought. For what is nature? How can we form a picture of it as it was before the intervention of humans with their ravaging tools?... True, nature is resistant, and infinite in depth, but it has been defeated, and now waits only for its ultimate voidance and destruction' (Lefebvre, 1994: 31). In other words it seems that every aspect of nature too, has been, or soon will be, irredeemably transformed by its association with modernity and its incorporation within what Guattari (2000: 47), refers to as Integrated World Capitalism (IWC).

Thus the features Locke regarded as indicative of the change from the state of nature to civilisation reoccur in terms of this culture of contamination. There is *ecological contamination* marked by the destruction of wilderness and its transformation into a standing reserve for human labour. There is *economic contamination* marked by the commodification of the life-world and the massive and immoderate increase in the consumption of the natural world this allows and promotes. And there is also *ethico-political contamination* in terms of the globalisation of an anthropocentric ideology and discourses of moral and political governance justified through the myth of the social contract.<sup>5</sup> Each of these features feeds upon and supports an ideology of progress that permeates every aspect of the contemporary life-world. This then is why it is possible to define modernity as a 'culture of contamination'; pollution is not its by-product but the systemically produced counterpart of progress itself. Postmodernity too might be defined in this framework as marking modernity's limit, the moment when nothing sacred is left, when the state of natural innocence and the unmediated relation between nature and humanity envisaged by modernity's early political philosophers finally sinks 'below the horizon behind us' (Lefebvre, 1994: 31). That is, postmodernity begins where discourses about the end of nature and the loss of the sacred are taken as serious descriptions of the world's actual ontology.

Primitivism is then an attempt to recuperate the purity of the state of nature by rejecting the culture of contamination in its entirety. 'Ideologies such as Marxism, classical anarchism and feminism oppose aspects of civilisation; only anarcho-primitivism opposes civilisation, the context within which the various forms of oppression proliferate and become pervasive – and, indeed, possible' (Moore, 2001: 2). In almost every way primitivism reverses the 'progressive' values associated with the Lockean myth privileging the state of nature over civil(ised) society. Primitivism's Edenic narratives clearly regard the movement away from the primitive gatherer-hunter societies embedded in nature as the anarchist equivalent of the biblical Fall. '[L]ife before domestication/agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual

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equality, and health. This was our human nature, for a couple of million years, prior to our enslavement by priests, kings, and bosses' (Zerzan, 1994: 16).<sup>6</sup> Zerzan, like other primitivists, draws heavily upon the work of Marshall Sahlins and anthropological studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer societies like the !Kung and the Mbuti to argue that such 'pre'-agricultural economies were 'the original affluent society' (Sahlins, 1974).<sup>7</sup> It wasn't lack of intelligence or lack of ambition that stopped Paleolithic cultures 'advancing' rather the 'success and satisfaction of a gatherer-hunter existence is the very reason for the pronounced absence of 'progress'' (Zerzan, 1994: 23). Such societies were non-hierarchical, largely non-violent and non-competitive, had no conception of private property and inordinate amounts of free time which they spent socialising. 'The state of nature is a community of freedoms' (Perlman). The people were healthier and happier in complete contrast to the current 'landscape of absence ... the hollow cycle of consumerism and the mediated emptiness of high-tech dependency' (Zerzan, 1994: 144).

In tackling the productivist and contractarian myth of modern origins head-on primitivism certainly provides a counter-modern analysis that has important implications for radical environmentalism *insofar* as it reminds us that this culture has to be critiqued at source. We don't just need to criticise the commodity fetishism associated with the predominance of exchange values but must also reject Locke's initial anthropocentric invocation of the instrumental and proprietorial effects of human labour and the consequent reduction of the natural world to use-value. The attempt to speak of the return to the state of nature also marks the rejection of those varieties of postmodernism characterised by a resigned (or less often a celebratory) acceptance of a future that cannot escape from an evanescent hyper-reality. In both these ways anarcho-primitivism has much in common with, and adds a socio-political dimension to, deep ecology and its championing of various forms of intrinsic value in human and non-human nature.

But this is precisely where difficulties begin to arise. Leaving aside the complex question of 'intrinsic' values (but see Smith, 1999) serious issues emerge with the wish to recuperate a state of nature, of absolute freedom and natural purity, of a lost innocence unsullied by civilisation. While it may make sense to refuse to accept 'the death of nature and renounce what once was and what we can find again' (Zerzan, 1994: 46) not everything that has been lost *can* be recovered. Once lost, primal innocence, like those biological species driven to extinction, is gone forever. There may indeed be much to be mourned about such losses but it is vital that mourning does not become reduced to a repetitive and self-absorbing melancholy, an unrequitable yearning to retain that which is no longer present (Freud, 1991, Smith, 2001b). In addition to this there are of course many drawbacks with the Palaeolithic lifestyle and many positive aspects of civilisation. Without some major catastrophe it is simply ludicrous to believe that even those most critical of this culture of contamination would choose to lose

all of society's material comforts and revert to gatherer-hunting. There is therefore a danger that in emphasising the return of the primitive, Zerzan et al are in danger of forcing 'pre-history' to repeat itself in a manner that may be both tragic and farcical.

Such difficulties have been recognised by other environmentalists who share something of primitivism's analysis of civilisation. Figures like Edward Abbey, self-proclaimed ecological anarchist and author of texts like *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1979) – so inspirational for the current generation of ecological activists – was forthright about needing to retain at least some of civilisations products. Abbey, like the primitivists, claims that 'humanity made a serious mistake when our ancestors gave up the hunting and gathering life for agriculture and the towns. That's when they invented the slave, the serf, the master, the commissar, the bureaucrat, the capitalist, and the five-star general. ... Nothing but trouble and grief ever since, with a few comforts thrown in here and now, now and then, like bourbon and ice cubes and free beer on the Fourth of July, mainly to stretch out the misery' (Abbey, 1991a: 141). But in many of his writings Abbey also makes plain that there is a surprising amount he regards as worth retaining. 'Ah yes you say, but what about Mozart? Punk Rock? Astrophysics? Flush toilets? Potato chips? Silicon chips? Oral surgery? The Super Bowl and the World Series? Our coming journey to the stars? Vital projects, I agree, and I support them all. (On a voluntary basis only.) But why not compromise? Why not – both? Why can't we have a moderate number of small cities, bright islands of electricity and *kultur* and industry surrounded by shoals of farmland, cow range, and timberland, set in the midst of a great unbounded sea of primitive forest, unbroken mountains, virgin desert? The human reason can conceive of such a free and spacious world; why can't we allow it to become – again – our home?' (Abbey, 1991b: 237).

Abbey too argues that our environmental and political problems are constitutive of, rather than merely accidentally associated with, the current social order. His response however is rather different. He rejects the all or nothing approach characteristic of both the advocates of progress and the puritanical primitivists. 'But we cannot pick and choose this way, some technophiles may insist – it's the entire package, plagues and all, or nothing. To which one must reply: If that is true then we have indeed lost control and had better dismantle the whole structure. But its not true: We *can* pick and choose, we can learn to select this and reject that. Discrimination is a basic function of the human intelligence' (Abbey, 1991c: 47). But while Abbey weighs the pros and cons of aspects of modern life (in a manner, it must be admitted, so atheoretical that it sometimes constitutes little more than an arbitrary wish-list) he too seeks to regain and retain the pristine innocence of the state of nature. His solution is to contain the culture of contamination within isolated pockets away from the 'free and spacious' natural world, to give those people willing to make the effort the option of leaving

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the guilty comforts of civilisation and re-entering the state of nature on a part-time basis.

Deep ecologists take a slightly different tack towards 'the protection of wild species and habitat against the onrushing 'artificial environment' and man's [sic] complete domination of the planet' (Sessions, 1988: 40). Like the primitivists many, though by no means all, deep ecologists also argue that 'research has clearly shown the advantage of the hunting-gathering life over both the agricultural life and modern industrial culture' (La Chapelle, 1988: 105). They too envisage modernity as a culture of contamination and, despite differences of emphasis, almost all speak of resacrilisation of the relationship between small scale 'ecosystem' cultures' (107) and the environment in which they reside. Even those sceptical of the neo-pagan or pantheistic revivalism often associated with deep ecology agree that a 'truly deep spirituality acknowledges ... a depth certainly not discernible in the world system of modern materialism' (Zimmerman, 2000: 191). Deep ecologists differ from anarcho-primitivists and writers like Abbey mainly in emphasising the existence of and need to follow natural or ecological laws. For them the state of nature is not anarchic but ordered by nature itself and our ethico-political systems should reflect and respond to this natural ordering (although it should be born in mind that some anarchists have also regarded nature as a sphere of *spontaneous* natural order).

Social ecologists like Murray Bookchin have still less in common with the primitivist critique. Bookchin also criticises the deep ecologist's wish to follow (what they suppose to be) the natural order of things. He rejects both the idea of humbly subjecting ourselves, like ants, 'to the dicta of "natural law"' (Bookchin, 1990: 98) just as he rejects modernity's Promethean urge to dominate and conquer nature. (Indeed, Bookchin sometimes seems to read anarcho-primitivists as similarly positing a 'natural law' thesis.) But while social ecology also regards Enlightenment myths of the state of nature as deeply implicated in our current environmental predicament the state of nature is clearly not something to which Bookchin wants to return. Although our 'civilisation has turned into one vast hurricane of destruction' the danger of this is precisely that 'it threatens to turn back the evolutionary clock to a simpler world where the survival of a viable human species will be impossible' (122). Indeed, Bookchin clearly regards some radical environmentalists as promoting a very 'anti-social' ecology and instead espouses a model of evolutionary social change that is much closer to the dominant progressivist ideology – and thus appeals to many as both more moderate and 'reasonable'. The problem is though that Bookchin entirely misses the ethico-political point of trying to conserve or recuperate the innocence associated with the state of nature (and by default also absolves the culture of contamination from much of its constitutive guilt).

## INNOCENCE AND THE CULTURE OF CONTAMINATION

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, to waken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is called progress. (Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History IX*, 1992: 242)

Through a curious reversal peculiar to our age, it is innocence that is called on to justify itself. (Camus, *The Rebel*, 1984: 12).

All innocence seems lost in an age of progress. As Benjamin's parable makes clear, even angelic innocence seems at the mercy of this raging storm. And, given the unprecedented scale of the human and environmental catastrophe we face, modern civilisation must be deemed guilty in a manner not easily absolved because it is not acquired accidentally but is constitutive of progress itself. What is more, that which has been 'smashed' in the name of progress has all too often been destroyed knowingly and in full recognition of its consequences.

Primitivism and its radical environmental allies can, I have argued, be regarded as engaging in a fundamental critique of this culture of contamination from the perspective of the (lost) innocence of the state of nature. But this is problematic precisely because if McKibben, Lefebvre and others are right the state of nature, and the innocence associated with it no longer exist, they are now left irretrievably behind as modernity's contaminatory processes – ecological, economic and ethico-political – come to effect every area of life.

Primitivism is doubly problematic because to modern eyes innocence, like unsullied nature, is an impossible ideal. Indeed it might be fair to say that innocence is far from being regarded a virtue, that it is anathema to progress, in almost every way its opposite and its opposition. Political, epistemological and ethical progress are all predicated on the end of innocence. Knowledge and innocence cannot, we are told, coexist. While progress pins its hopes on an unspecified future, innocence always lies in the past, as something lost in childhood or left behind in Eden, and once gone it cannot, so it is claimed, be regained. To be in a state of innocence is at best a mixed blessing, since it suggests a blissful ignorance about the difficulties that must be overcome in the 'real world' and a failure to understand the requirements of *realpolitik*. From the point

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of view of progress the innocent is a dupe, a gullible simpleton unaware of the future's myriad possibilities and always open to manipulation by the Machiavelian activities of others. The loss of innocence is then, the progressive claims, a small price to pay to secure intellectual, individual and political 'freedoms'. Since the time of Hobbes and Locke this has been modernity's alibi for the horrors it continues to commit; this is the Faustian (social) pact that, from the perspective of primitivism, may yet condemn us all to an ecological hell here on Earth.

Innocence is that which would remain outside civilisation's social, economic, and moral order and so the innocent is, by definition, unable or unwilling to *contract* with others. Innocence is that which remains disassociated from the world of use, exchange and even moral values. Innocence defies (capitalism's) logic; it claims to but simply cannot (be allowed to) exist. And so innocence must, as Camus remarks, be made to justify itself, brought to trial, because of the danger it poses to the all encompassing (post)modern order. Innocence must be presumed guilty, it must in some way be made complicit, for only then can modernity assuage its own guilt, transferring and dispersing it, shifting it as (the market's) needs require from one place to another in order to continue, to 'progress'. And so modernity conspires to eliminate the very possibility of innocence. Progress, embodied in the form of Integrated World Capitalism (Guattari, 2000: 47) and wearing the mantle of democracy strives to be ever more 'inclusive', to eradicate or incorporate whatever resists the incessant pressures to be used, commodified and transformed. Nothing must be allowed to stand outside the vortex of capital's circulation, everything and everyone must have a price. And so the 'democracy' peculiar to our age must ensure that all this destruction has been carried out in *our* name and that, to some extent, we are all implicated in this guilt. Our taxes are used to buy yet more weapons of destruction. Our attempts to buy happiness serve only to bury entire ecosystems under mountains of rubbish and rising sea-levels. And this voluntary and enforced complicity is very much to the advantage of those who profit most from modernity's and capitalism's depredations since, being guilty ourselves, who amongst us can throw the first stone?

Let us be clear what is being argued here. Innocence is that which is external to, or precedes, the moral order. It is amoral and anarchic, neither knowing nor respecting 'right' or 'wrong', but acting only according to desire and need. As Kierkegaard argues, knowledge of good and evil is the sign of Adam's *loss* of innocence, it is a distinction that can only 'follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the [forbidden] fruit' of knowledge (Kierkegaard, 1980: 44). 'It appears, at first view, that men in a state of nature, having no moral relations or determinate obligations one with another could not be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious' (Rousseau, 1986: 71). Rousseau recognises that such amorality may seem terrible to his 'civilised' readers but, he argues, we must not prejudge the issues. We must look and see whether post-contractual life is any

better – ‘whether virtues or vices preponderate among civilised men: and whether their virtues do them more good than their vices do harm’ (Rousseau, 1986: 71). Innocence is an ideal, like ‘the state of nature’ and Eden itself, that encapsulates that which is lost through progress, and it survives only to the extent that it has not been compromised. Thus innocence (amorality) always and everywhere threatens to expose the guilt (immorality) of the social order that would destroy it. That which is innocent cannot enter into the moral compromises entailed by the social contract and survive. And, since the dominant political philosophy of modernity presupposes (and requires for its legitimacy) that this social contract be *all-inclusive*, the survival of innocence threatens its totalising ambitions.

I am arguing then that primitivist discourses about freedom, naturalness, and so on can also be read as a knowing or unknowing parable of innocence (as Rousseau’s was). From this perspective modern civilisation is premised upon and requires the end of innocence. Let me give just one example that has nothing (and everything) to do with the primitivist critique. Despite, indeed because of, the social and technological contract with ‘progress’ our towns and cities are not the places of free association that real liberty requires. We are watched by technology’s eye in the service of the state and IWC. Of course, those who ‘police’ us argue that ‘the innocent have nothing to fear’. ‘If one is really innocent,’ the argument goes ‘then why be concerned about even the most constant and intrusive surveillance; its only the guilty that are caught.’ But this is not true nor, as Foucault argues, is this the rationale behind panopticism (Foucault, 1991). We are all *captured* on CCTV and it is precisely our innocence that is lost through this constant observation. We are all deemed (potentially) guilty. None of us is beyond the camera’s suspicions and all are made subject to and must internalise the moral norms it imposes. In other words we are all on trial and presumed guilty and we are never *proven* innocent since these observations proceed into an indefinite future. (Onora O’Neill has recently described this situation in terms of a ‘culture of suspicion’.) Our voluntary or involuntary compliance entails the loss of innocence, the acceptance of one’s potential guilt in the eyes of others and the right of the state and Integrated World Capitalism to sit in judgement over you. This ‘democratic’ dispersal of guilt contaminates everyone; the amorality of innocence is transformed into a kind of moral capital to be traded on camera in the market of the mall. Guilt is shifted onto others and accumulates around the real ‘innocents’, those that cannot or do not recognise the malls’ moral order, those that pose a danger by persistently refusing to shop or by treating the shopping centre as something other than a space for consumerism. These people are followed, harassed and moved on in the name of moral ‘security’. Thus, as Camus argued, it is indeed innocence that it is called upon to justify itself, to justify why it should (but will not) be allowed to survive outside the panopticon’s vision – a vision extending well beyond the confines of the mall into every aspect of contemporary life.

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Those who would try to retain or regain an ideal of innocence, those who rebel against the burden of guilt that 'progress' would place upon them, thus disturb the silent acquiescence that the proponents of progress and capital expect and demand. The mantra of the rich and powerful is always that we must move forwards, must have 'freer markets, more economic growth, more technology, more control, more capital, more of the same. 'There is no (reasonable) alternative', no going back. Thus those that challenge the 'progressive' rationale of modernity must be guilty of the most terrible of modernity's crimes, 'irrationality'. Innocence is a most *unreasonable* ideal for it suggests that somewhere, something might yet stand outside of modernity's (im)moral order, that something might survive the storm we call progress intact.

The real importance of primitivism, despite its political impracticalities, is that it goes to the root of modernity's self-serving ethico-political justifications, it revisits its myth of origins and challenges its 'progressive' presuppositions. The innocence and purity of the state of nature – its amorality – provides a clear point of contrast to the immorality of the culture of contamination. *This is always and everywhere the role of innocence, to stand as a mythic contrast to the corrupting influence of work, money and realpolitik.* Without innocence (amorality) then morality itself becomes meaningless as anything other than compliance with social norms. It ceases to share in what Eliade refers to as the 'transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the Gods' (Eliade, 1987: 167). Without an ideal of innocence then the new Orwellian world order of Integrated world Capitalism can indeed adjudge us all guilty all of the time and act upon this judgement as and when its requirements demand. Similarly, without an ideal of pure nature then all nature risks being reduced to its human functions (as a standing reserve) and can and will be transformed as and when the system requires. This is why claims that nature is no more are wrong and dangerous and signify compliance with the current world order (Smith, 2001c).

But where many primitivists go wrong is in thinking that innocence is a state of being, a life that can be lived; that the state of nature is something we can actually inhabit, a future possibility. Ironically, like Locke, and contra Rousseau, writers like Perlman and Zerzan think that such a state is a straightforwardly *mundane* reality rather than a meaningful mythic account of the human predicament.<sup>8</sup> They call upon archaeological evidence and employ anthropological accounts of contemporary indigenous populations to support the *everyday reality* of past and present primitivist communities. But, as Eliade argues this is not the purpose of a myth. To 'tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*' (Eliade, 1987: 95) and thereby make of this telling an 'apodictic truth', a 'sacred reality'. The myth of the social contract, of leaving behind the state of nature through progress is the apodictic truth, the sacred modernist shibboleth that (ironically) underlies its programme of desacralisation. Reading this myth literally means that primitivists find themselves limited to reversing modernity's evaluations, thus explicitly endorsing the modernist dichotomy between (the



state of) nature and culture. Surely a more important critical point can be taken from primitivism's attempt to go 'back to the beginning', namely that whatever its rationalistic and de-mystifying pretensions modernity too relies upon its own myths to justify its existence, myths that arbitrarily counter-pose progress and innocence, culture and nature.

Where modernism feeds off and seeks to eradicate innocence and nature, where it judges its progress by the distance it puts between itself and the state of nature, the primitivist regards themselves in Hegel's (disparaging) term as 'buried in nature' (Hegel in Eliade, 1987: 166). What both parties fail to recognise is that *all* cultures, even the most 'primitive', are *moral* worlds that transcend (go beyond) but can *never* entirely leave behind nature. The primitivist must recognise that the amorality (innocence) of the state of nature is not something that can exist in its pure form where human social life is concerned. As Rousseau recognised innocence is something that could be maintained, if at all, only in absolute isolation from everyday life and our fellow humans. This of course is why attempts to retain innocence have always revolved around trying and failing to keep the 'innocent' absolutely separate from and uncontaminated by everyday life. It is also why nature purists have all too often insisted on removing all human inhabitants from those idealised islands of untrammelled nature like Yosemite in order to preserve them. On the other hand, the important message from primitivism's analysis of the 'culture of contamination' has to be that a genuinely moral and civil(ised) society requires ideals of natural innocence and pure nature. These ideals, which embody a world that transcends (goes beyond) the everyday realities of contemporary culture, cannot be erased without dire consequences. The ideal of amorality (innocence) is what sustains moral worlds; *it is in the dialectic between innocence and guilt that ethical choice exists*. In eradicating all semblance of the sacred and the natural modernity genuinely leaves us without ethical alternatives, reducing us to a (brave) new realm of necessity rather than choice.

Of course, such ideals cannot exist in isolation. The state of nature may be a myth but it is not simply fictional, it is a sacred (ethical) ontology. It is an ethical expression of the desire and wonder we can still experience in relation to human and non-human Others. And since, as Rousseau so rightly remarked, the state of nature 'perhaps never did, and probably never will exist', then perhaps the claims of Lefebvre and McKibben need not seem quite so apocalyptic. Nature still survives and re-emerges on modernity's margins and innocence, like Benjamin's angel, continues to critically survey the results of modernity's storm. The 'angel of history', like the remnants of the rainforests, stands as an unanswerable indictment of the destruction wreaked in progress' name. Despite modernity's best efforts, we still do inhabit and can experience a world of incredible cultural differences and (bio)diversity. We still have the choice of how to respond to that world. Insofar as it helps to emphasise such choices primitivism need not necessarily be regarded as either extreme or entirely naïve.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although in other writings Rousseau's account seems much closer to Hobbes. Rousseau sometimes suggests that it was really only the fact that there was little social interaction between widely separated individuals that stopped the war of one against all. 'These barbaric times were a golden age, not because men were united, but because they were separated ... His needs, far from drawing him closer to his fellows, drove him from them. If you wish men would attack each other when they met, but they rarely met. A state of war prevailed universally, and the entire earth was at peace' (Rousseau, 1986: 33).

<sup>2</sup> By this I mean that while Locke may have been influenced to some degree by prevailing scientific attitudes and even contributed to the 'evolution of a mechanistic materialism' (Gare, 1993) and the 'cultural assimilation of Newtonianism' (Mathews, 1994: 20) his philosophical references to the new science and technologies are few and far between. Locke was not, in any straightforward sense, a Baconian (Aaron, 1971: 12).

<sup>3</sup> There are problems with using the terms primitivism and primitivist. First, because they may over-emphasise similarities between a heterogeneous community of writers, theorists and activists. Second, because such labels often become unnecessarily limiting. *Green Anarchist* magazine, for long the main proponents of primitivism in Britain, has recently dropped the phrase 'for the destruction of civilisation' from its masthead announcing that it was 'sloughing of the millstone of primitivism' (Anon, 2001: 8). Third, because 'primitive' has certain derogatory connotations. Thus Fredy Perlman states 'I wouldn't use the word Primitive to refer to a people with a richness of life. I would use the word Primitivo to refer to myself and my contemporaries, with our progressive poverty of life' (Perlman, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Though here the analyses of the ecological modernists like Beck and Giddens and radical environmentalism part company, since the former's solution is merely a more 'reflexive' version of the same global and technical managerialism. It still wishes to transform all about it in the name of human progress.

<sup>5</sup> Some environmentalists might also wish to highlight the epistemological issues that Locke confined to his supposedly 'non-political' writings, that is the extreme empiricism of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1996). Locke's approach could be read as undermining traditional varieties of knowledge in favour of the constantly 'progressing' accumulation of information that supposedly underpins and justifies the language and practices of modern science. Indeed commentators like Vandana Shiva speak of the extinction of traditional worldviews and the predominance of a language of techno-science precisely in terms of a form of 'epistemological contamination' (Shiva 1994). This however is a complex question that cannot be addressed fully here.

<sup>6</sup> 'The structure (non-structure?) of egalitarian bands, even those most oriented toward hunting, includes a guarantee of autonomy to both sexes' (Zerzan, 1994: 38).

<sup>7</sup> 'The !Kung people miraculously survived into our own exterminating age. R.E. Leakey observed them in their lush African forest homeland. They cultivated nothing except themselves. They made themselves what they wished to be. They were not determined by anything beyond their own being – not by alarm clocks, not by debts, not by orders from superiors. They feasted and celebrated and played, full-time, except when they slept. They shared everything with their communities: food, experiences, visions, songs. Great personal satisfaction, deep inner joy, came from the sharing' (Perlman).

<sup>8</sup> Not all primitivists follow this line. 'My outlook is not premised on the lifeways of specific primitive groups or a belief in the existence of a past golden age of humanity in

harmony with nature (although this may have occurred). It's based on trying to achieve the kind of world I desire' (Williams, 2001: 39).

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