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The Ideology of Collapse

Chris R., Chris K., Sasha K.

Fall 2003

...if our goal is to remain free and build a genuine revolutionary movement (to survive the collapse of civilization and possibly be agents of the chaos that will cause such a collapse)...

- "Same Children Playing Revolution in the Park?" in *Green Anarchy* #8.

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Some green anarchists seem to have an apocalyptic yearning for catastrophe, like Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver* rhapsodizing about the rain that is going to come and wash all the scum off the streets. But many of us find it far more desirable to work to get rid of industrial capitalism before some cataclysmic event occurs. We chose to begin with this quote from the pages of *Green Anarchy*, not to single out and criticize a particular statement about anarchism from among the many that have appeared in these pages, but in order to focus upon a tendency within anarchism that is becoming increasingly evident, particularly among some people who identify with the label "green anarchist." This is the tendency to focus on the complete collapse of civilization, usually seen as a sudden oc-

currence. This collapse is seen by some anarchists as both desirable and inevitable.

First, we need to ask, is collapse desirable? This is a complicated question, as it immediately begs the corollary question: desirable for whom? Regardless of how this corollary question is answered, it is not clear that a massive, immediate collapse of economic and social structures that was not the result of conscious revolutionary action would be the ideal situation for anyone. It has sometimes been suggested that a substantial human die-off would accompany such a collapse, and that prospect should strike us as horrific. Of course, there are lots of people dying right now, and many of these deaths are, in one way or another, a result of global industrialism, particularly in the Third World. Green anarchists sometimes suggest that Third World peoples would be better off in the event of a sudden collapse than denizens of countries like the United States. This may be true to the extent that their already dismal situation wouldn't be worsened all that much; those who are already dying off would be joined by perhaps millions of others. However, it is hard to see how the situation would actually improve for many people. Worse still, if such a collapse involved an ecological catastrophe, as it most likely would, nobody would escape its dire consequences. It is true that those relatively few remaining people who are self-sufficiently living off of the land could possibly benefit from the demise of most of the rest of us. A global capitalist economy would no longer be systematically eliminating their land base and driving them to cultural extinction. However, vast numbers of refugees from industrial society would need fertile land to farm, hunt, and forage, and this would perhaps pose an equally deadly threat to any land-based people that have survived global capitalism. Furthermore, a collapse could be an ecological catastrophe, whether its initial causes were ecological or economic. If the projected human die-off is large enough, massive corpse pollution could eliminate most potable water for a time, and other toxic after-

effects of industrialism would plague survivors for generations to come.

Of course, disaster may come whether we will it or not. Capitalism certainly is not permanently sustainable. It is wise to prepare as much as we can for such a possibility, and to extricate ourselves from the industrial economy as much as possible. In fact, some of the actual steps we can take in preparation for collapse are in many ways indistinguishable from steps taken to make a smooth transition out of industrialism. There's nothing wrong with reducing our dependence on the global economy. But anarchists should be trying to do more than store nuts and spread chaos. Neither of these activities is enough if we really want to create a new society.

This brings us to the next question: is collapse inevitable? There is no guarantee that capitalism is heading for a global collapse any time soon. Capitalism has shown an amazing ability to adapt to problems and change its course. Our anarchist practice, however, should be based on our own desires to live in anarchy; therefore, waiting for collapse may mean giving up the very foundation for our anarchism, for collapse may not come during our lifetime. Assertions that this collapse is inevitable are given on faith; the amount of data that needs to be collected, understood, interpreted and understood for such a prediction to be made is prohibitively vast.

Capitalism is always attempting to come up with band-aids to fix its self-induced problems. It seems clear that these half-measures will be too little and too slow to prevent enormous ecological devastation and depletion of the world's flora and fauna, including the millions of humans who are starving to death every year, as well as most of the planet's living systems. What is not clear is whether capitalist reforms will be too late to maintain human life on the planet, or to maintain capitalism itself. There is no guarantee that a magical occurrence will come and sweep capitalism off the planet during our lifetime. If we don't get together and rid ourselves of it, we may never see its end.

Indeed, in believing that civilization will collapse on its own, the collapsists take on one of the worst aspects of classical Marxism: a determinist view of history. Most Marxists have argued that capitalism will bring about its own demise—that its history is determined from its beginning. Likewise, collapsists argue that civilization will collapse on its own. Whereas for Marxists the economy is in the driver's seat of history, for the collapsists it is usually nature. There are a number of problems with this view. First of all, and most significant, such a view deprives our actions of any importance. The end of capitalism is not set in stone; the final chapter of its history must be written by us. The idea that civilization will collapse on its own implies that we should wait for its collapse, biding our time by learning survival skills. Both versions of determinist history show a profound lack of faith in human agency, in our potential to change the terrible situation into which we have gotten ourselves.

Green anarchists often use natural metaphors which produce a determinist view of history which de-emphasizes the ability of humans to play a positive and active role in ending our present circumstances. Human subjectivity and imagination are often exiled, and conscious revolt is marginalized. Historically, this distrust or sheer fear of human intentions has roots in the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. The conservative Edmund Burke was the first to develop the idea that people's collective intentions can only bring disaster, and what is needed instead is a slow, natural change. As this tendency passes into the Romantic tradition—an influence on primitivism and collapsism—it takes on an even stronger anti-human and anti-rational color. Collapsism thus takes on the view that human nature (desire itself) is negative and destructive, even anti-natural. Collapsism is thus thoroughly dystopian and follows along with the anti-utopian common opinion of the present; it is the anti-civ tendency cleansed of the Situationist/Surrealist utopian impulses that helped to inspire anti-civ from the start.

the economic-industrial system a push before a more disastrous ecological collapse occurs.

Does this mean we will not print articles that may be declared “collapsist” by our intellectual critics? Not if there are some valuable contributions they add to the ongoing anti-civ discussion, because we do not wish to become ideological and rigid, and because we have much to include from the variety of people wishing for an end of this dehumanizing and destructive system. We also feel that there is much to learn, tactically and practically from those who would be labeled “survivalists”, such as primitive-skills, re-wilding techniques, and life experience outside of this system. Our struggle consists of not only destroying civilization, but also beginning to live in ways outside of its paradigm. While we are often suspicious of civilized motivations, as anarchists, we feel that human nature is a positive and creative element in the larger web of life, which will hopefully continue to write the ongoing story of this planet.

velop liberatory relationships with those around us. If they have taught us nothing else, the events of September 11th, 2001 should serve to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently liberatory in a praxis that seeks to increase the level of chaos and destruction in society. Neither storing nuts nor spreading chaos is an adequate response to capitalism. Anarchists should be searching for a way toward a better life for all of us, toward a future built of our desires, not trying to drive us toward the darkest and most terrifying of all possible denouements to the tragedy that is modern civilization.

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GA Note: We decided to print this article, not because we agree with all of its claims as to what green anarchists (or collapsists) promote, assert, or believe, but because it does raise some important criticisms of those who ‘wish to wait around for the collapse of civilization’ and those who do not think along practical and strategic lines in the dismantling of the global industrial system. Collapsism, however, is but one strain within green anarchism, and this article makes a number of overstatements, simplifications, and generalizations as to what green anarchists, primitivists, and some collapsists believe. This is no doubt due to the fact that the authors’ primary interaction with these folks tends to be on the internet, which is a very low priority for most anti-civilization anarchists. Many green anarchists rarely use computers, those who do spend little time on internet discussion boards, and the few online dwellers tend to represent some of the most extreme and alienated perspectives. Let’s be clear, *Green Anarchy* does not promote collapsism as an ideology or practice. We all have differing feelings on how the future will unfold and the extent we may realistically play in its outcome, but all of us on this collective, and most anarcho-primitivists and green anarchists we know, fully realize, endorse, and promote insurrectionary activity aimed at destroying civilization so as to make possible the liberation of desires and activities of all beings, including humans. We hope this may happen by helping to give

These utopian tendencies were formed out of a link between imagination and desire: the imagination of a new world grew out of our own desires and our belief that the realization of these desires only seemed impossible within the clouded common sense of a stifling present. Hence, the Situationist slogan: “Be realistic, demand the impossible!” But the message of many collapsists is very different: don’t trust the desires and utopian dreams of people, they only lead to authoritarian, civilized revolutions; trust nature instead. The future is determined for us and human desire, human imagination and human agency all disappear; they are washed away by a self-defeating fear of all human imagination and human activity. The human must be reduced to animal urges and that is all. Everything else—all that belongs to culture instead of nature, in a simple reversal of a very civilized dichotomy—will be left out after the collapse.

Trusting nature, would then mean to collapsists, that we don’t have to do anything to get rid of civilization or capitalism, that nature will do it for us. As one recent *Green Anarchy* article states, “Nature itself seems to be conspiring against the empire.” Another article proclaims, “Civilizations collapse, it’s what they do.” These quotes are reassuring to some, but they fail to note that civilization in general has not collapsed; in fact, over time it has only gotten stronger and learned how to build on its weaknesses. One problem with such arguments is that singular “civilizations” are conflated with the general concept of “civilization.” Indeed, civilizations have collapsed, but the dominating institutions of civilized life continue. Since its very beginning over ten thousand years ago, civilization has continued to exist in one form or another. We can talk of the Fall of Rome in terms of the end of a particular instantiation of civilization, but in no sense has civilization itself ever fallen. In its most extreme forms, collapsism can become downright conservative when the collapsist spends his or her time arguing with all their might against insurrectionary activity. This has become common on the primitivist web boards of the internet. In this respect,

collapsism comes to be clearly aligned with the present dominance of liberal-democratic ideology, in which it is possible to believe that the whole environment might collapse very soon, but impossible to see capitalism as something we could choose to end by our own action. It is this very impossibility that illustrates the hegemony of the present system over our thought and specifically over the collapsist ideology. It is this hegemony that removes any desirable future from the realm of the possible and any action taken against capitalism and the state from democratic acceptance. Thus, collapsism's congruence with liberal-democratic ideology becomes visible in the fact that many collapsists believe that revolution or insurrection is inherently totalitarian or authoritarian. Instead of seeing capitalism's continued destruction of our world and our lives as authoritarian, some collapsists argue that we cannot attack such a system without the consent of the majority of the earth's people or we ourselves will be authoritarian—we must wait for a collapse brought about by the force of nature. This reversal (a shift from seeing capitalism as authoritarian to seeing the attack on it as authoritarian) aligns itself perfectly with the dominant liberal-democratic ideology of the post-sixties world we inhabit.

At this point, it becomes unclear what differentiates collapsist green anarchism from survivalism; all one can really advocate doing is storing food. In fact, if we accept that capitalism is indeed on an inevitable trajectory toward collapse, and if the collapsist's aim is to allow industrialism to run its determined course and flame out in as destructive a manner as possible, then would not the best tactic be to take capitalism to its own extreme? In other words, those who believe that collapse is the inevitable terminus of civilization's present trajectory could easily justify spending their time speeding up the process by engaging in an orgy of wasteful consumerism. While this could perhaps be fun, it is hardly the sort of thing to promote in an anarchist publication. However, this sort of political quietism is implied in a statement like this one from the article "Lessons From the Fall of Rome" (GA #12):

This is not a warning or plea to change when I say that we face the same dangers as did Rome. I am instead trying to show that there may yet be hope for this awful civilization's collapse.

Collapsism seems to suggest that an oil industry executive would do more to bring civilization to an end than would any anarchist. But if survivalism and consumerism follow logically from an ideology of collapse, this should only serve to demonstrate how useless this standpoint actually is. Instead, it seems better to try to bring industrial society as we know it to an end with as little destruction as possible, before it has fulfilled itself in an end that may entail a devastating loss of biological life, if not a total finale to human existence. We all have a lot of work to do if we want to find a way to live together without large-scale violence and ecological destruction, and simply wishing for a disaster to come and do all of the work for us is delusional and self-defeating. One presumably engages in anarchist activity in order to improve the world and one's situation in it, and for most of us this means trying to end capitalism; collapsism, on the other hand, can only ignore capitalism, or aid it in its disgusting rapine of the biosphere.

To be fair, it is pretty clear that the authors of our epigraph do not intend to promote quietism or consumerism when they speak of being the "agents of the chaos" that will cause "the collapse of civilization." *Green Anarchy* consistently promotes insurrectional activity, and collapse-oriented articles represent one of a wide variety of views presented in this publication. The above remarks apply to "collapsism" as an ideology that sees massive collapse as the inevitable result of civilization, not to those who wish to promote an insurrectionary break with the present order. Certainly, this order should be made to collapse in some sense of the word. However, the vision that is found in this journal and elsewhere is too often rigid and ideological, as it sometimes downplays the power each one of us has to achieve a measure of self-determination and to de-