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Interview with John Moore

John Filiss

An important essayist and author of four short books — *Anarchy and Ecstasy*, *The Primitivist Primer*, *Lovebite* and *Book of Levelling* — John Moore stands out for his observations on primitivism as social theory. Though his books unfortunately see little distribution in North America, John’s excellent writings frequently appear in *Green Anarchist*, (BCM 1715, London, WC1N 3XX, U.K.).

Could you give a basic definition of “primitivism.”

In ‘A Primitivist Primer’ I define primitivism as ‘a shorthand term for a radical current that critiques the totality of civilisation from an anarchist perspective, and seeks to initiate a comprehensive transformation of human life’, and as ‘a convenient label used to characterise diverse individuals with a common project: the abolition of all power relations — e.g., the structures of control, coercion, domination, and exploitation — and the creation of a form of community that excludes all such relations’. I’m not sure now whether ‘current’ is the right word. Certainly primitivism is a position within the broad spectrum of anarchism. I’m also more critical of using the concept ‘community’ now. But these caveats aside, I’m happy enough with my formulation.

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How comfortable are primitivists in general with the term and label “primitivist?”

I’ve no idea. I can only speak for myself. Personally, I find it very restrictive and these days try to avoid using it whenever possible, for a number of reasons. First, it’s a very ambiguous term because — like its counterpart, civilisation — it has many meanings, and as a result it’s easily misunderstood or caricatured. Second, there’s always the danger — as witnessed recently in *Fifth Estate*, for example — where hostile commentators can twist your words so that it looks as if you are constructing a primitivist ideology and setting up a primitivist political movement, even when you state exactly the contrary.

As I said just now, in the ‘Primer’ I refer to the word ‘primitivism’ as ‘a shorthand term’ and ‘a convenient label’, and to me that’s all it ever can be. There’s a certain idealism floating around that makes a fetish out of avoiding labels, and of course if we lived in an ideal world such labels might be meaningless. But we don’t live in an ideal world (assuming that it’s desirable to want to do so!). The situationist position on this issue seems to me much more sensible. Asked why they considered it necessary to call themselves situationists, they replied: ‘In the existing order, where things have taken the place of people, any label is compromising ... For the moment, however ridiculous a label may be, ours has the merit of trenchantly drawing a line between the previous incoherence and a new rigorousness. What thought has lacked above all over the last few decades is precisely this trenchancy’. Using labels unfortunately excludes some people and closes some paths, but refusing to use labels to define positions leads to fuzziness and confusion — in other words, just those conditions where reformists can undermine anarchist revolutionary practice.

It’s important that people don’t get hung up on labels, but recognise them for what they are — tools for creating clarity — and then move on to forwarding anarchist projects. In the ‘Primer’ I said that ‘primitivism’ is merely a convenient label. But for me, anyway, it

subsets of this project. The one closest to my heart is developing my writing of short fiction. In their different ways, Hakim Bey and Alfredo Bonanno have drawn our attention to the importance of anarchist ontologies. Within this framework, I am interested in fostering distinctively anarchist epistemologies. And the discourses and practices of art, it seems to me, have potential in terms of developing such epistemologies, and far more possibilities for forwarding the anarchist struggle than political discourses.

How do we make this world a better place?

The short answer to this question is: through anarchist revolution. But the most urgent question, and the one with which I am primarily interested, of how this is to be brought about is the one that 'primitivists' have studiously ignored. Thankfully, however, others have not. The ideas and activities of Alfredo Bonanno and the Italian insurrectionalist anarchists strike me as key here. Studying, adopting and innovating practices of attack along the lines developed by the insurrectionalists, as well as cross-fertilising our ideas and activities with theirs, seems to me the most important task now facing anti-civilisation anarchists, and one that I intend to pursue.

has lost its convenience: not that it has become inconvenient, but rather that it now strikes me as a disabling rather than an enabling term. In a recent issue of *Social Anarchism* I have tried to outline my current perspectives in an essay entitled 'Maximalist Anarchism/Anarchist Maximalism'. I am not recanting on primitivist or anti-civilisation positions, but attempting to recast them in a different and more explicitly insurrectionalist terminology and set of references. And one that hopefully avoids the restrictions and failures of 'primitivism'.

How would you contrast primitivism with environmentalism?

Environmentalism has a single focus: the environment. From this perspective, social critiques of varying degrees are launched. Often these critiques are partial critiques and not necessarily either anarchist or revolutionary. In contrast, 'primitivism' (for want of a better word) critiques the totality of civilisation from an anarchist perspective and seeks the abolition of all power relations. This is a massive contrast. Further, like leftists who worship the abstraction called 'the proletariat', environmentalists often subordinate themselves to the abstraction called 'the earth'. The name of the group Earth First! illustrates this point perfectly. Such a perspective remains alien to a project seeking the dismantlement of what I call the control complex. The historical agent in the revolution of everyday life can only be the impassioned free individual, grounded firmly in his/her will to rebellion, not some vague and potentially totalitarian abstraction such as 'the earth'.

To what extent do you feel primitivists seek a literal return to primitive lifeways, vis-a-vis the extent to which examples of primitive life are simply a tool for social critique?

A difficult question to answer. I am sure there are people who seek a literal return to primitive lifeways. I am not one of them. In fact, I am not interested in a *return* to anything. My sense is that the future which might emerge from the anti-civilisation anarchist project would be *sui generis*. I am not interested in precedents. Of course one might see premonitions of the future in moments of

rebellion such as the Spanish revolution or May 1968, or in some primitive lifeways. But the world I envisage as emerging in an anarchist post-civilisation situation is, I think, largely unimaginable, precisely because of the unprecedented scope of its abolition of power relations.

What do you feel are the seminal primitivist texts?

For me personally, everything follows from Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*. Every time I re-read it I find something new in it — it's just sparkling with insights. But this isn't to say that I regard it as holy scripture. It has its flaws and faults, like every piece of writing. Further, social processes have moved on since it was written, as has the project of struggle against the totality, and so like any text — however inspirational it might be — it cannot be the last word.

One apparent division within primitivism involves the center of critique. Fredy Perlman and others disparage civilization, contrasting it with the vitality and spontaneity of primitive cultures. John Zerzan, however, goes further and critiques culture as such, with its constituents art, language, and number. With respect for both sides, how separate do you see this division?

Well, primitivism — if that's a useful or valid word to use in this context — isn't a unitary project with a set ideology or 'line'. If people insist on using the word, then it might be more useful to speak of primitivisms rather than primitivism as such. If anarchism contains a spectrum of positions, so does 'primitivism'. Marshall McLuhan — someone who's definitely *not* a primitivist! — once said that his texts didn't aim to provide answers, but rather to act as probes. And I think it might be appropriate to think of the work of thinkers like Perlman and Zerzan in this way too. I like to think of my work as anarchist speculations, which I see as a synonym for probes in McLuhan's sense of the term. If we think of writers within the 'primitivist' or anti-civilisation orbit in this light, the apparent division to which you refer then appear to be merely shifts

people seem to think that primitivism means a desire to return to an idyllic version of primitive life, and this is not my project at all, I don't identify myself in this way. As a result, I don't feel the need to defend the practices of non-civilised people. It's more important to me to develop my own practice. If this draws upon those elements of primitive lifeways that I feel are sufficiently substantiated and congenial, then that's my concern. But in no way do I feel the need to take on board the whole kit and caboodle of that range of diverse practices which are (rather confusingly) lumped together under the heading of 'the primitive'.

From what quarters on the political spectrum do you perceive the greatest hostility towards primitivism? From where the greatest empathy?

At present, anti-civilisation anarchism unfortunately remains a rather marginalised form of practice, and so hostility remains limited due to ignorance of its existence. But, as the most advanced and radical form of anarchism, the entirety of the political spectrum is its enemy. It is, to appropriate the individualist anarchist slogan, the enemy of society, and as such can expect nothing but hostility from the dominant social order once the latter becomes aware of its existence.

At the moment, the greatest hostility comes from those who are aware of its existence and are in immediate danger from it: i.e., the varieties of classical, workerist and leftist anarchism. Anarcho-leftism rightly fears that its antiquated ideologies are being superseded by anti-civilisation anarchism in terms of its analyses and revolutionary fervour, and hopefully soon by its insurrectionalist interventions.

What are some of your upcoming projects?

There is only one overwhelming project: the revolutionary and comprehensive transformation of human life in an anarchist direction, and the self-realisation of my individuality in conjunction with generalised self-realisation through the destruction of power and the construction of a free life. All of my personal projects are

civilised projects of domination and exploitation that I view them with deep suspicion. There is such a high level of mediation in such disciplines that I sometimes think it is rather ironic that their materials are appropriated to bolster a project — ‘primitivism’ — which affirms the need for immediacy.

Another term commonly used to describe primitive tribes is egalitarianism, which in our society carries a veneer of leftist spite and envy, as well as Christian insipidness. But among primitives it is merely a natural outcome of individuals self-actualizing outside the specializations imposed by our artificial way of life.

Well, that’s another example of imposing categories on ‘the primitive’ which are ideologically loaded. Egalitarianism is a bourgeois ideal because it merely means ‘equal before the law’. As anarchism wants to abolish the law and the social contract upon which it supposedly rests, egalitarianism has nothing to do with anarchism. The abolition of power means maximising the possibilities for individuals to self-actualise themselves, but has nothing to do with making people equal or equivalents — an impossible and potentially totalitarian aim, in any case. In this sense, one can discern a rough equivalence between primal anarchy and post-civilisation anarchy, but nothing more.

On the other hand, do you feel that primitivists tend to present an overly idyllic version of primitive life? Cannibalism, infanticide, senilicide, head-hunting, and ritual torture are among the many atrocities once seen among the pre-civilized of every continent, including Europe.

The myth of the noble savage is always a temptation for those who see themselves as primitivists. And it’s a convenient knee-jerk criticism for those who are hostile to primitivism. That’s another reason why I try to avoid using the term ‘primitivism’, and a good example of why it’s a disabling — rather than enabling — term. I get rather tired of continually having to hack through the thickets of misconceptions that come along with the word. And as most

in emphasis or perspective, or as proposals thrown out for others to consider, refine, revise and act upon, rather than absolute truths.

In what countries or parts of the world does there appear to be the greatest interest in primitivism?

At present, at least, the greatest interest seems to be in Britain and the United States. The collision between Anglo-American ‘primitivism’ and continental European anarchism — which seems to me to be becoming increasingly imminent — is likely to throw up some strange and beautiful mutations. If ‘primitivism’ catches on in other parts of the world, the outcomes are likely to be even more intriguing.

In response to an essay of yours published in *Social Anarchism*, Noam Chomsky writes, “The idea that scarcity is a social category is of course true, but not relevant to the real world, in my opinion.” And later, he adds, “I can’t spend my time arguing about things that seem to me hopelessly abstracted from human existence, now or in the foreseeable future.” Do you feel that Chomsky’s own efforts are somehow more relevant to human existence than the perspectives of primitivism?

If Chomsky’s books and the *Manufacturing Consent* film are indicative of his ‘efforts’, then certainly not. Chomsky is basically a wealthy, mass media star who addresses the concerns of American bourgeois liberals in typical reformist rhetoric and mass formats. He is completely out of touch with the trajectories of contemporary anarchist practice, which is hardly surprising given, I understand, his failure to *inhabit* — or situate his daily practice in — an anarchist milieu. Chomsky’s comment, in the item to which you refer, that ‘The world I live in, and see around me, has no resemblance to what Perlman writes about...’, speaks volumes to me about his stance. Perlman was exemplary in the sense of being an anarchist intellectual who *inhabited* an anarchist milieu. Perlman lived and breathed in that milieu, whereas Chomsky’s natural habitat appears to be the mass media, the auditorium, and the academy.

Chomsky voices a fairly common objection to primitivism when he states that “going back to such a state would mean instant mass genocide on an unimaginable scale.” For me, at least, it is easy to see that such critics are imposing a time constraint (“instant,” in this case) on a transition which would doubtless take generations to effect.

Your response to Chomsky’s comment seems reasonable to me. However, it rests on the tacit notion that the transition to a post-civilised or post-control complex situation can and should be equated with ‘going back’. It may seem as if I’m trying to avoid answering the question here, but as I said earlier, I am not interested in ‘going back’ to anything. A transition from ‘here’ to ‘there’ or from ‘now’ to ‘then’ is necessary. But, for me anyway, this transition isn’t a return, but a moving forward which is simultaneously a coming home. And that process is one that is lived by each anarchist individual at each moment. The ‘transition’, the revolution of everyday life, is an ongoing process. Power is perpetually vulnerable because it has no guarantee that it will continue from one moment to the next. Hence, anarchist spontaneism. There’s no need to wait for ‘the historically appropriate moment for revolution’. Individual and small-scale insurrections take place all the time. When they combine and coincide, power is threatened and revolution becomes possible. The pressing issue, it seems to me, is not to speculate abstractly about the transition, but to work out projects which forward the revolutionary process.

In that same essay of yours, you describe the first hierarchy as being based on “subjugation of the female (and ultimately on the gerontocracy’s subjugation of the young).” And yet most of the animal kingdom tends to be either male or female dominant. E.g., our most similar living relative, the bonobo, is female-dominant. Even positing that our ancestors found a happy medium where neither sex held sway, wouldn’t the beginnings of a hierarchy which ultimately gave rise to civilization have found a more

likely source in the movement away from perceptual consciousness and towards systems of belief?

Again, I’m not trying to avoid answering the question, but this issue no longer interests me. Figures such as Perlman and Zerzan have undertaken some valuable work in discerning the origins of power and hierarchy, and in no way do I want to disparage their work. I do feel, however, that the issue of origins has become something of an obsession with some people. Discerning origins is important in so far as one wishes to become aware of the dimensions of power that need to be exposed, challenged and abolished. After a certain point, however, no more can be said about origins. No doubt some people will continue to work on refining our understanding of the origins of power, but to my mind that kind of investigation should now be considered peripheral to the main concern of developing projects which furthers attacks on the control complex.

Primitivism draws much of its useful insights from observation of primitive tribes. Do you feel that we run into special difficulties in even trying to describe their way of life as compared to ours? For example, I have seen primitive tribes described as democratic in their functioning. But in the modern world, democracy is a farcical term, used by pundits from all sides, which has no direct correlation with freedom. But among members of a small tribe, it can mean active input into any form of group decision-making which affects the tribe as a whole.

As you rightly suggest, part of the problem is perceptual and terminological. It’s a truism that different languages produce different realities, and interpreting primitive peoples with hermeneutic codes derived from the discourse of civilisation is inevitably going to result in distorting characterisations of the primitive (for example, seeing such peoples as ‘primitive’, with all the ideological weighting that such a word carries). But the problem goes beyond a phenomenological level, I think. Archaeological and anthropological endeavours are so profoundly implicated in imperial and