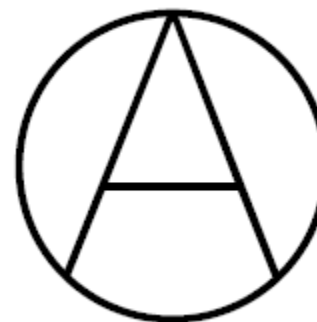


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David Graeber
What is Anarchism?
{ excerpt from *Direct Action* }



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One reason I started the chapter as I did was because I also wanted to convey something of the flavor of anarchist debate, which has always tended to differ from the more familiar, Marxist style in focusing more on these kind of concrete questions of practice. Many have complained that anarchism lacks high theory. Even those who are considered its founding figures—Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin—often seem more pamphleteers and moralists than true philosophers, and the best-known anarchists of more recent times have been more likely to produce witty slogans, wild poetic rants, or science fiction novels than sophisticated political economy or dialectical analysis.⁵ There are thousands of Marxists academics but very few Anarchist ones. This is not because anarchism is anti-intellectual so much as because it does not see itself as fundamentally project of analysis. It is more a moral project. As I've written elsewhere (Graeber 2002, 2004), Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy: anarchism, an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice. The basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the opposition to all forms of coercive authority—are essentially moral and organizational. Admittedly, this flies in the face of the popular image of anarchist as bomb-throwing crazies opposed to all forms of organization—but, if one examines how this reputation came about, it tends to reinforce my point. The period of roughly 1875 to 1925 marked the peak of a certain phase of anarchist organizing: there were hundreds of anarchist unions, confederations, revolutionary leagues, and so on. There was a spurt, towards the beginning, of calls for the assassination of heads of state (Anderson, 2006), it was quite brief and anarchist spokesmen and organized groups quickly withdrew support from this strategy as counterproductive. Nonetheless, following decades saw a continual stream of dramatic assassinations by people calling themselves anarchists. I am not aware of any actual assassin during this particular period who actually was a product of those anarchist organizations, much less were their actions planned or sponsored by them; rather they almost invariably turned out to be isolated individuals with no more ongoing ties to anarchist life than the Unabomber, and usually about a roughly equivalent hold on sanity. It was rather as if the existence of anarchist gave lone gunmen something to call themselves.⁶ But the situation created endless moral dilemmas for anarchist writers and lecturers like Peter Kropotkin or Emma Goldman. By what right could an anarchist denounce an individual who kills a tyrant, no matter how disastrous the results for the larger movement? The whole issue was the subject of endless intense moral debate: not only about whether such acts were (or could ever be) legitimate, but about whether it was legitimate for anarchist who did not feel such acts were wise or even legitimate to publicly condemn them. It has always been these kinds of practical, moral questions that have tended to stir anarchist passions: What is direct action? What kind of tactics are beyond the pale and what sort of solidarity do we owe to those who employ them? Or: what is the most democratic way to conduct a meeting? At what point does organization stop being empowering and become stifling and bureaucratic? For analyses of the nature of the commodity form or the mechanics of

notes:

5 In fact anarchists have long taken much of their political economy from Marxists—a tradition which goes back to Bakunin, who though he was a political rival of Marx, also was responsible for the first translation of *Capital* into Russian—rather than feeling obliged to set up some anarchist school or political economy of their own. Though to be fair, early anarchists also tended to point out that almost all the concepts attributed to Marx (or for that matter Proudhon) were really developed within the worker's movement of the time, and merely systematized and elaborated by theorists.

6 Malatesta made exactly this argument at the time (1913).

7 If existing Marxists were to abandon practical politics entirely and retreat into the academy, producing endless volumes of Marxist analyses on every topic under the sun and overwhelming all other intellectual tendencies, then most anarchists would consider this an altogether positive development.

8 Even here things are a bit more subtle—many of the founding figures of anarchism were Russians, who did not really identify with what they thought of as “the West”—but this is how the story is normally told.

9 Many anarchist newsgroups, for example, tend to be dominated by right-wing freemarket enthusiasts who call themselves “anarcho-capitalists,” who seem to exist only on the Internet; at least, I have been involved in anarchist politics for five or six years now and have yet to actually meet one.

10 Zerzan became famous immediately after Seattle in part because journalists all suddenly wanted to speak to an anarchist, and he was the only one most had in their Rolodex, since he was for a while a suspect in the Unabomber case.

11 One might say, in fact, that Zerzan's, or Bob Black's, endless blanket denunciations of “Leftism” are themselves an extreme version of one tendency within the very Leftism they condemn.

12 Barbara Epstein was already puzzling over the phenomenon when discussing the role of feminist spirituality in the direct action movement of the early 1980s—the fact that “many Pagans simultaneously believe in the Goddess as reality and the Goddess as metaphor for the power of human collectivity and human bonds with nature. In the same way, many participants in the direct action movement have simultaneously held naïve and sophisticated concepts of magical politics” (Epstein 1991: 184). By which she means, both the belief that a blockade in itself can shut down a nuclear plant, and that it can raise consciousness and change the public's frameworks of understanding in such a way that it can contribute to its closing. Actually, I've argued elsewhere that this kind of doublethink is typical of magical practice pretty much anywhere, from Madagascar to Nepal (Graeber 2002)

13 As Bob Black puts it in “The Abolition of Work”: “You may be wondering if I'm joking or serious. I'm joking *and* serious.”

other aspects.¹³ Also, one in which imagination, the ability to create new theories, visions, or anything else, is itself the ultimate, unknowable, sacred thing.

All this is perhaps a bit overstated: the reader should probably not take my own theoretical effusion too much more seriously than those about which I'm writing. The main point, though, is that—unlike some of the “classical” works of Proudhon, Kropotkin, Rocker, Malatesta, De Santillan, and others, written in the shadow of Marxism—contemporary anarchist “theory,” such as it is, is most explicitly not intended to provide a comprehensive understanding that will instruct others in the proper conduct of revolution. It is not an ideology, a theory of history. It tends, rather, towards a kind of inspirational, creative play. It is more than anything else an extrapolation from the imaginative projection of certain forms of practice: the experience of working in a small affinity group becomes the model for Primitivist idealizations of the hunter/gatherer band, assumed to be the only social unit for most of human history; the experience of real experiments in worker control becomes the basis for an imaginary planet in the science fiction story; the experience of sisterhood becomes the model for a matriarchal Goddess religion; the experience of a wild moment of collective poetic inspiration or even a particularly good party becomes the basis of a theory of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Even when contemporary anarchists turn to Marxism, their overwhelming favorite theorists are the Situations Raouls Vaneigem (1967) and Guy Debord (1967) the Marxist theorist closes to the avant-garde tradition of trying to unify theory, art, and life. If anarchism is not an attempt to put a certain sort of theoretical vision into practice, but is instead a constant mutual exchange between inspirational visions, anti-authoritarian attitudes, and egalitarian practices, it's easy to see how ethnography could become such an appropriate tool for its analysis. This is precisely what ethnography is supposed to do: tease out the implicit logic in a way of life, along with its related myths and rituals, to grasp the sense of a set of practices. Of course, another way of doing so would be simply to follow anarchist debates, as I did at the beginning, since these have tended to center on ethical and organizational questions. Nowadays, these debates center most of all on how to combat racism and sexism in the movement, about forms of decision-making, and questions of violence and non-violence. [...]

alienation, most have been content to draw on the written work of Marxist intellectuals (which are usually, themselves, drawn from ideas that originally percolated through a broader worker's movement in which anarchists were very much involved). Which also means that, for all the bitter and often violent disagreements anarchists have had with Marxists about how to go about making a revolution, there has always been a kind of complementarity here, at least *in potentia*.⁷ This is why I think it's deceptive to write the history of anarchism in the same way one would write the history of an intellectual tradition like Marxism. It is not that one cannot tell the story of this way if one wants to. Most books on anarchism do. They start with certain founding intellectual figures (Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin), explain the radical ideas they developed, tell the story of the larger movements that eventually came to be inspired by those ideas, and then document the political struggles, wars, revolutions, and projects of social reform which ensued. But if one looks at what those supposed founding figures actually said, one finds most of them did not really see themselves as creating some great new theory. They were more likely to see themselves as giving a name and voice to a certain kind of insurgent common sense, one they assumed to be as old as history. While anarchism, as a movement, tended to be very strongly rooted in mass organizing of the industrial proletariat, anarchists (including those who were themselves industrial workers) also tended to draw inspiration from existing modes of practice, notably on the part of peasants, skilled artisans, or even, to some degree, outlaws, hobos, vagabonds, and others who lived by their wits—in other words, those who were to some degree in control of their own lives and conditions of work, who might be considered, at least to some degree, autonomous elements. One might say, in Marxist terms, that they were people with some experience of non-alienated production. Such people had experience of life outside the state or capitalist bureaucracies, salaries and wage labor; they were aware such relations were not inevitable; quite often, they viewed them as intrinsically immoral. They were often themselves more drawn to anarchism as an explicit political philosophy, and at least in some times and places (Spanish peasants, Swiss watchmakers) formed en masse—what's more, those elements of the industrial proletariat that tended to find the most affinity with anarchism were those who were the least removed from other modes of life. Marx himself tended to dismiss the anarchist base as a particularly inauspicious combination of “petty bourgeoisie” and “lumpen proletariat,” and considered the notion that they could in any way stand outside capitalism ridiculous. Capitalism, for Marx, was a totalizing system. It shaped the consciousness of all those who lived under it in the most intimate fashion. The kind of critiques of capitalism one saw in authors like Proudhon or Bakunin, Marx argued, were simply the voice of a petit bourgeois morality, the small-scale merchants and producers railing against the bigger ones. They had nothing to teach revolutionaries. Only the industrial proletariat, who had absolutely no stake in the existing system, could be a genuinely revolutionary class. Some would no doubt object that this view of Marx's thought is a bit crude and unnuanced and probably they'd be right. But it represents the view that soon became

canonical among those who claimed to speak in the name of Marxism. My purpose here is not to argue the merits of the case but to emphasize the degree to which we have been viewing the entire anarchist project, essentially, through the eyes of its rivals. Even more, that anarchism tends to involve a different relation of theory and practice than what came to be called 'Marxism'. The latter is—for all materialist pretensions—profoundly idealist. The history of Marxism is presented to us as a history of great thinkers—there are Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyites, Gramscians, Althusserians—even brutal dictators like Stalin or Enver Hoxha had to pretend to be great philosophers, because the idea was always that one starts with one man's profound theoretical insight and the political tendency follows from that. Anarchist tendencies, in contrast, never trace back to a single theorist's insights—we don't have Proudhonians and Kropotkinites—but Associationalists, Individualists, Syndicalists, and Platformists. In just about every case, divisions are based on a difference of organizational philosophy and revolutionary practice. How, then, do we think about a political movement in which the practice comes first and theory is essentially, secondary? It strikes me that it might be helpful, rather than starting from the word "anarchism," to start from the word "anarchist." What sorts of people, or ideas or institutions, can this word refer to? Generally speaking, one finds three different ways the term can be employed. First, one can refer to people who endorse an explicit doctrine known as "anarchism" (or sometimes "anarchy")—or perhaps more precisely, a certain vision of human possibilities. This is more or less the conventional definition. Anarchists become the bearers of an intellectual tradition: one whose history can indeed be traced back to the founding figures in the nineteenth century, that spread quite rapidly by the turn of the century to the point where anarchist literature was being avidly read in places like China and India well before Marxism or other strains of Western revolutionary thought had made much of an impression (e.g., Dirlik 1991), but over the course of the early twentieth century was largely displaced by it.⁸ Any number of prominent figures of the time, from Picasso to Mao, began their political lives as anarchist and ended up Communists. But one can also speak more broadly. It's certainly not unheard of to hear historians refer to, say, peasant rebels in early China, or religious radicals in medieval Europe as "anarchists"—meaning that they rejected the authority of governments, and believed people would be better off in a world without hierarchies. In this sense, there have always been anarchists, and there is no great intellectual tradition that hasn't seen the development of anarchist ideas in one form or another. (This is of course why the ideas of the nineteenth-century European anarchists could make sense to people in other parts of the world to begin with.) Finally, there is a third sense. When an anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard refers to the Nuer as living in an "ordered anarchy" (1940), or Joanna Overing uses the word to describe the Amazonian Piaroa (1986, 1988), they are not referring to either doctrines or, even, quite, to antiauthoritarian rebelliousness. They are referring primarily to institutions, habits, and practices. That is, there are certain societies characterized by egalitarian forms of organization—whether systems of exchange, forms

some gesture to subvert any possibility of its being used as an authoritative text. Primitivism perhaps most closely resembles a traditional sectarian ideology in trying to vanquish all opposing positions, but its content is palpably fantastic and for the most part could not possibly be reflected in practice. Some visions take the form of novels. Others read like comedy routines. One of the more popular anarchist authors of the 1990s—the inventor, for instance, of the concept of the "Temporary Autonomous Zone"—writes under the persona of Hakim Bey, an insane Ismaili poet with an erotic obsession with young boys, his writing taking the form of communiqués from a non-existent Moorish Orthodox Church. Bey's mystical pretensions typify another tendency: to identify the space that might otherwise be filled by theory, the transcendental position, as it were, with the sacred, but then to make the sacred ridiculous. I'll be talking about this habit later on when I discuss the role of giant puppets—what might be called the main sacred objects of the movement (but also self-consciously foolish ones). Here, suffice it to say that the relation of anarchism to spirituality has always been complex and ambivalent. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European anarchism always tended to be strongest in countries—Russia, Spain, Italy—with a powerful church, and tended to take on a radically atheist tone, identifying the very notion of God with the principle of hierarchy and unquestioning authority. (So Bakunin's famous phrase "if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him." There were exceptions—Christian anarchists like Tolstoy—but they were usually not closely related to social movements.) Some have argued that Spanish anarchism, particularly in its rural manifestations, itself took on some of the qualities of a prophetic, millenarian religion (Brenan 1943; cf. Borkenau 1937)—but, if so, it was one whose main rituals involved acts like burning churches, or removing the mummified bodies of nuns from church crypts to reveal the corruption lurking below (Lincoln 1991). In contemporary anarchism this hostility has largely faded away: in part because in many countries, the church has lost so much of its power; in part because so many anarchist allies (indigenous peoples, for example, or in the United States, Quakers, radical priests and ministers) are likely to have come to their politics through religious convictions; in part, too, because of the development of specifically anarchist forms of spirituality such as feminist paganism. At the same time, specifically anarchist forms of spirituality are—in addition to being inherently pluralistic and open-ended (hence polytheism)—almost always at least a trifle self-effacing and capable of distance from themselves.¹² Many pagans have a striking ability to see their views as profoundly true, and simultaneously, as a kind of whimsical comedy. Often they seem to be engaging at the same time in a ritual and the parody of a ritual; the point where laughter and self-mockery are likeliest to come into the picture is precisely the point where one approaches the most numinous, unknowable, or profound. The same whimsical, playful quality is reflected in a good deal of pagan feminist literature, as in other branches of anarchist theory, and appears to reflect a sensibility that, at its best, sees "theory" as, if anything, a form of creative writing, both profoundly true because it highlights certain otherwise invisible aspects of reality, but at the same time profoundly foolish, in that it does so by being willingly blind to

state of a world that is fundamentally dislocated and wrong. Similarly, even the most avid fans of Zerzan will usually admit, if pressed, that they aren't really in favor of the abolition of language, but instead emphasize the degree to which language can be deceptive, ideological, or mask and occlude more direct forms of experience. All this, I think, does much to explain the appeal, and the reason Primitivism tends towards such absolutes. It is really an attempt to take absolutely seriously those feelings of utter alienation that drive so many middleclass, white teenagers to anarchism in the first place, and to at least try to imagine a world in which every aspect of alienation would be totally extinguished. The result can only be a kind of myth. Primitivists will often admit this too, claiming that widespread myths of apocalypse, and of the garden of Eden, are intuitive understandings of real truths: that we once did live in a kind of paradise, that we lost it, and that through a catastrophic collapse of industrial society, we will get it back again. The myth of apocalypse comes to substitute for the faith in revolution. It is, in a way, the same thing, except more absolute: the traditional anarchist rejection of political representation becomes a rejection of representation in any form, even art or language. For most Primitivists, this is what we are mainly dealing with: a comprehensive critique of alienating institutions, and a kind of impossible dream-vision of total liberation that can, if nothing else, provide inspiration and continually remind one why one is in rebellion to begin with. For many, the fact that this makes no sense whatsoever to outsiders is probably a major element in its appeal. Let me take an apparently very different example. One of the main forms for the dissemination of anarchist ideas in recent years in America have been feminist science fiction novels: from Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) to Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993). They operate in a similar way. They are crystallizations of certain tendencies of thought, extrapolations from certain forms of practice, experiments in utopian imagining. The main difference is that since the visions developed in novels are not claiming to be anything but fiction, those who enjoy reading (or writing) them do not tend to claim alternative visions are wrong. In the case of Green Anarchism, the vitriolic quality of so much of the writing seems to result from the confluence of two factors. On the one hand, the urgency of the ecological cause, the sense that the planet is being destroyed and we are all doomed anyway if something isn't done very quickly, and a certain habit of extremely contentious argument inherited from the sectarian Marxist origins of so many of the original participants.¹¹ In this, they are unusual. As I mentioned, anarchists have long tended to shun high theory. As David Wieck put it back in 1971 (long before anyone had thought of the term 'postmodern'): "Anarchism has always been anti-ideological: anarchists have always insisted on the priority of life and action to theory and system. Subjection to a theory implies, in practice, subjection to an authority (a party) which interprets the theory authoritatively, and this subjection would fatally undermine the intention of creating a society without central political authority. Thus no anarchist writings are authoritative or definitive in the sense that Marx's writing have been regarded by his followings (1971: ix)." In fact, most of what serves the same role as theory in anarchism makes

of decisionmaking, or simply the accustomed ways of going about everyday life—and this tends to inculcate, and be supported by, a broadly egalitarian ethos. Anarchism, in this sense, is a way of living, or at least, a set of practices. In other words, one can see "anarchism" either as a vision, as an attitude, or as a set of practices. The distinction between the last two is admittedly somewhat fuzzy. Those who go about their daily lives on an egalitarian basis tend to do so because they feel that is what people ought to do; those who find all forms of hierarchy objectionable will, ordinarily, do their best to find ways to live without it. Still, in the first case, an egalitarian ethos may well remain largely inchoate. In theory, at least, one living in an anarchistic society might be entirely unaware that there is any other way to live; anyway, such a person will probably only develop explicit anti-authoritarian attitudes once she encounters someone with very different assumptions—say, for example, a foreign conqueror. Similarly, those indignant about being pushed around by social superiors will often examine their own ways of dealing with friends and neighbors as evidence that hierarchy is not a natural and inevitable feature of human life. They might very well start valuing the equality of those relations, or even try to deal with such people in more self-consciously egalitarian fashion than they had before. The nineteenth-century Spanish peasant and Swiss watchmakers who found the ideas of Proudhon or Bakunin so amenable—and who Marx denounced as petit bourgeois—were clearly doing exactly that. What I would like to argue is that "anarchism" is the best thought of, not as any one of these things—not as a vision, but neither quite as an attitude or set of practices. It is, rather, best thought of as that very movement back and forth between these three. After all, the experience of foreign conquest or subordination will not necessarily cause once egalitarian communities to reject the very idea of hierarchy, or to become more assiduously egalitarian in their way of dealing with each other: the effect might well be exactly the opposite. It's when the three reinforce each other—when a revulsion against oppression causes people to try to live their lives in a more self-consciously egalitarian fashion, when they draw on those experiences to produce visions of a more just society, when those visions, in turn, cause them to see existing social arrangements as even more illegitimate and obnoxious—that one can begin to talk about anarchism. Hence anarchism is in no sense a doctrine. It's a movement, a relationship, a process of purification, inspiration, and experiment. This is its very substance. All that really changed in the nineteenth century is that some people began to give this process a name. Looking at it this way does make it much easier to understand some things that would otherwise be extremely puzzling. For example: why what passes as anarchist theory often bears so little relation to what the majority of anarchists say and do? If one were to try and understand North American anarchism simply by reading theoretical or ideological statements in the best known and widely distributed explicitly anarchist periodicals, one would end up with an impression that most anarchists were either Primitivists opposed to all forms of technology, even agriculture, or extreme anti-organizationalists, suspicious of any group of more than six or seven people—and that most of the remainder had

declared their allegiance to a document called “The Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists” written by Russian émigrés in Paris in 1924. One might also come to the conclusion that the popular impression of anarchists as wild-eyed, impractical nihilists dedicated to rebellion for its own sake was probably not that far from the truth; or, at least, that anarchists seemed to be divided between nihilists and fervent sectarians whose main form of political practice is mutual denunciations. Examining anarchist discussion pages on the internet would do little to disabuse them of this impression.⁹ When I first became involved in anarchist politics, therefore, I was surprised to discover that not only did the overwhelming majority of activist who considered themselves anarchists not identify with any of these positions, many were not even aware of them. Others, who do read the magazines, read them mainly for entertainment value. Elsewhere, I’ve referred to these non-sectarians as “small-a” anarchists, to distinguish them from those who identify with any one particular strain: Green Anarchist, Individualists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, post-Leftists, Platformists, and so on. While statistics are unavailable, Chuck Munson, who occasionally surveys those who frequent infoshop.com— informs me that about 90% of American anarchists would seem to fit into the small-a category, since only about 10% are willing to identify themselves with any particular subset. What’s more, even many of those who do identify themselves with one particular strain act in ways that would be impossible to understand if we were dealing with a political ideology anything like the traditional sense of the term. Let me take one example— Primitivism— perhaps the most obvious *outré*. In America, Primitivist ideas first began to take form in circles surrounding a journal called the *Fifth Estate*, in Detroit, in the 1970s and 1980s. The argument began as a synthesis of a certain strain of Marxism with ideas first articulated by socialist heretics such as Jacques Ellul and Jacques Camatte, who came to see the nature of technology itself as lying at the core of more of what Marx saw as alienating and oppressive about capital, and thus rejected the idea that the proletariat, as an essential part of the global “megamachine,” could possibly be the agents of a revolution (Miller 2004). As part of a broader critique developing around that time of the productivist bias in traditional leftist thought, it’s hard to see this as anything but perfectly normal debate. By the 1990s, however, the most aggressive strain of Primitivist thought began to coalesce around the figure of John Zerzan, one time ultra-leftist, who began expressing utter hostility not only to “the Left” but to “civilization” itself. Zerzan basically took the most radical position that it was possible to take, arguing that everything from plant domestication to music, writing, math, art, and ultimately, even speech— basically all forms of symbolic representation, anything other than absolute, direct, unmediated experience—were really forms of alienation that could only be overcome through the destruction of civilization in its entirety, and a return to the stone age. Now, the influence of Zerzan on anarchism has been considerably overstated in the media, but, there are a significant number of Green Anarchists who take these ideas very seriously, and these Green Anarchists produce any number of zines and journals that aggressively tout these ideas, engaging in constant vitriolic debates with anyone willing to cast doubt on any aspect

of the ultra-Primitivist position.¹⁰ The idea of a return to the paleolithic—the rejection of plant domestication, let alone language—is obviously absurd. It would require reducing the earth’s population by at least 99.9% Nor are Primitivists entirely unaware of this: the *Fifth Estate* people had long debated about the problem back in the 1970s, the editors coming to the conclusion that, since they didn’t really wish to see a global catastrophe such as nuclear war, the best one could hope for was a gradual process of negative population growth. Most current Primitivists seem to alternate between openly espousing industrial and demographic collapse—I have heard some argue that humankind is a virus which needs to be largely eradicated—to, in defiance of all logic and common sense, denying that massive population decline would even be necessary (Zerzan often does this before non-anarchist audiences). At the same time, these same authors will regularly denounce anyone who advocates the classic anarchist strategy of “building a new society in the shell of the old.” They ridicule any talk of the slow, painful creation of new institutions as outmoded “Leftism,” arguing that only the complete destruction of all existing structures and institutions, followed by a return to our instinctual “wildness,” could possibly bring about real liberation. My purpose is not to critique the Primitivist position: this is obviously pointless. It clearly makes no sense to attach any strategy other than waiting for catastrophe, and then deny one is advocating catastrophe. My real point is: if this were classic ideological position, one should expect the effects to be utterly de-politicizing. If one were really looking forward to industrial collapse or some similar apocalypse, the most obvious course of action would be that followed by right-wing survivalists in the 1980s: take to the woods, dig a bunker, and begin stockpiling canned food and automatic weapons. Or, alternately, perhaps, find a distant island and try to begin reviving stone-age technologies. To my knowledge no proponent of Green Anarchism has ever done anything of either sort. Instead, they tend to act very much like any other anarchist. Primitivists may be more likely to become involved in ecological or animal rights campaigns than in, say, union-organizing, but in New York, for instance, I know ardent Green Anarchists who’ve worked with the Independent Media Center, in Direct Action Network (DAN), in video collectives, Food Not Bombs chapters, community gardens, prisoner-support networks, feminists groups, bicycle campaigns, squats, cooperative bookstores, anti-war campaigns, campaigns for the rights of immigrants, housing rights, cop-watch programs, and pretty much every other major manifestation of anarchist organizing. Often, in fact, Primitivists turn out to be amongst the most reliable and dedicated activists around. Confronted with this sort of contradiction, it’s hard to avoid asking the same question Evans-Pritchard asked about Zande witchcraft: “how can otherwise reasonable people claim to believe this sort of thing?” If one points out some of these contradictions to actual advocates of Primitivism—for instance, asking them to reflect on what would actually happen if the population of, say, Bangladesh were to one day decide to stop practicing agriculture— the usual reply will be “but it’s not a program! It’s a critique.” Alternately, they might challenge the very logical pragmatic terms of the argument, and insist these are poetic, intuitive understanding about the