

What is to blame for our suffering?

The human condition according to anarchoprimitivism and philosophical anthropology

Master Thesis

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ECTS: 15

Date of completion: 30-11-2022

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Word count: 19992

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1. The Return to an Unspoiled Past

From the onset of the industrial revolution, thinkers with a romantic streak, like Henry David Thoreau, have urged for a return to a simple life in nature.¹ Whilst living in the woods, Thoreau sought to gain insight into existence by getting rid of societal obstacles. This retreat was at least partly inspired by his reading of one of the ancient Indian Vedic texts, *The Bhagavad Gita*.² Some of the earliest Vedic texts mention mental exercises and meditative disciplines, falling under the notion of yoga, as a way to remove suffering.³ In the spiritually rich soil of ancient Vedic India, Gautama Buddha arose, and he asked himself why suffering existed and how to move away from it. He found suffering or Dukkha to be an inherent characteristic of man.⁴ He taught that mankind can liberate themselves from suffering by seeing things as they really are. Contemporary buddhist figures usually explain this in practical terms as being aware of one's cognitive faculties.⁵

In the Western tradition, the source of suffering is most commonly thought to be contingent on specific societal developments. In the early 1800s, Romantic artists, like William Blake and J. M. W. Turner, among others, used their art to protest the vision of nature as a machine. They instead chose to portray what they thought to be more essential and mystical scenes and figures, moving away from disenchanted city life which held no magical unknowns to uncover. During the enlightenment, philosophers pondered over the hypothetical state of nature devoid of civilization. John Locke argued that man in the state of nature, being free and independent, is compelled by the law of nature to respect others freedom and independence, ensuring that no one will "harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions."⁶ Later, Jean Jacques Rousseau stated that "nothing can be more gentle than [man] in his primitive state."⁷ And in a similar line to Locke argued that man "is withheld by natural compassion from doing any injury to others."⁸ The idea of a natural state of man does not start in the enlightenment, however, as it is echoed throughout the ages in myths from around the world depicting man's fall from grace.⁹ In the story of Genesis, for example, humans are expelled from the garden of Eden because of their acquisition of forbidden knowledge. The Ancient Greeks, furthermore, had the story of the eternal punishment of Prometheus for granting fire, symbolizing inventiveness, to humankind, marking the loss of their communion with the gods, or nature. A similar myth not containing an Indo-European root is found in Cameroon and Burkina Faso, where the heavens were originally within literal human reach. When a woman who touched the heavens whilst carrying a load of wood on her head asked God to move it out of the way, he moved it so far that he abandoned humanity to mortality.¹⁰

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, in Rossi, William ed., *Walden, Civil Obedience and Other Writings*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

² Barabara Stoler Miller, *Why Did Thoreau Take the Bhagavad Gita to Walden Pond?*, Yoga International, Accessed via: <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/why-did-thoreau-take-the-bhagavad-gita-to-walden-pond>.

³ Sue Hamilton, *Indian Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 107.

⁴ Hamilton, *Indian Philosophy*, 48.

⁵ Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, *Meditation Is Easier Than You Think* [YouTube Video], Accessed via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thcEuMDWxoI>.

⁶ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1823, 107, Accessed via: <https://www.yorku.ca/comminel/courses/3025pdf/Locke.pdf>.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, 2004, 52, Accessed via: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11136>.

⁸ Rousseau, *A Discourse*, 52.

⁹ *The Fall* [Encyclopedia Entry], encyclopedia.com, 2018, Accessed via:

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/christianity-general/fall>.

¹⁰ *The Fall*, 2018.

More than a century after Thoreau, some eco-anarchists, like John Zerzan, who are disillusioned by contemporary myths such as progress, propose we return to a way of life inspired by prehistoric hunter-gatherers.¹¹ This idea constitutes a specific stream of eco-anarchist thought called anarcho-primitivism. Zerzan, being one of the most prominent primitivist thinkers, uses anthropological analyses of primitive societies to argue that the advancement of technology, starting from the agricultural revolution, and also encompassing the use of symbols, such as mathematics or language,¹² and the concept of time,¹³ have led to alienation and domestication of present day man.¹⁴ In *A Primitivist Primer*, John Moore argues that what sets anarcho-primitivism apart from other ideologies is its wholesale criticism of civilization, whereas ideologies such as classical anarchism, Marxism and feminism, merely oppose certain aspects of it.¹⁵ Through the radical critique of the totality of civilization, the anarcho-primitivist “seeks to initiate a comprehensive transformation of human life.”¹⁶ For this reason, anarcho-primitivism and its surrounding ideas are especially worthwhile in the discussion of human condition and suffering. In trying to view civilization and even the most basic forms of culture as wholly contingent, it remains open to what the human condition is or might be at its most fundamental level, not unlike Locke and Rousseau in their analysis of a hypothetical state of nature.

Anarcho-primitivism and other related philosophies, such as deep ecology¹⁷, that seek to drastically restructure the way human societies relate to their environment, have unfortunately led to instances of eco-terrorism.¹⁸ One of the most infamous eco-terrorists might be the anti-tech terrorist Theodore Kaczynski,¹⁹ who was directly influenced by Jacques Ellul and Desmond Morris. He disagrees with Zerzan’s wholesale rejection of civilization, and notes that it is specifically modern technology that leads to alienation and a myriad of psychological problems for the individual.^{20 21} Philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner, might have disagreed with the origin of this alienation, as he argued that man is constitutively homeless and broken as a result of its excentric positionality, and it is through the mediating use of technology that one tries to be whole again, to no avail.²² In this way Plessner is closer to Gautama Buddha, as he sees the origin of suffering in something that is characteristic of man, and it is this same characteristic that steered man in the direction of the artificial to try and mend this brokenness.

A stark contrast arises, on the one hand the anarcho-primitivists argue for the dismantling of civilization as its myth of progress has shrouded the evermore alienated and disrupted reality of individual existence that is part and parcel of hyper-complex interconnected societies. The mistake of moving towards these complex societies has cost us the primordial bliss and peace that comes from living in direct connection with nature. Plessner on the other hand sees this alienation as something fundamental to the human condition and the way we live now can be seen as a result of that uniquely human condition. Here we find

¹¹ John Zerzan, *Why Primitivism?*, accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20091214075548/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/whyprim.htm>.

¹² John Zerzan, *Number: Its Origin and Evolution*, accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100618100924/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/number.htm>.

¹³ John Zerzan, *Time and its Discontents, Anarchy: A journal of desire armed* 39, 1994.

¹⁴ John Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, in Zerzan, John. *Future Primitive Revisited*, Feral House, 2012.

¹⁵ John Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*, The Anarchist Library, 2009, Accessed via:

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/john-moore-a-primitivist-primer>.

¹⁶ Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*.

¹⁷ Brian Morris et al., *Deep ecology & Anarchism*, Freedom Press, 1993.

¹⁸ Sean P. Eagan, *From spikes to bombs: The rise of eco-terrorism*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 19: 1-18, 1996.

¹⁹ David Johnston, *Judge Sentences Confessed Bomber to Four Life Terms*, The New York Times, 5th of May 1998.

²⁰ Theodore John Kaczynski, *Industrial society and its future*, in Kaczynski, Theodore John. *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski*, a.k.a. “The Unabomber”, Feral House, 2010.

²¹ Theodore John Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech Revolution: Why and How*, Fitch & Madison Publishers, 2016.

²² Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, Fordham University Press, 2019.

the philosophical problem that this thesis wishes to address: *Anarcho-primitivism sees the human condition as radically opposed to what is artificial, whereas the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner sees the human condition as being radically artificial. Can a synthesis of these views be established that confines this radical artificiality to a distinct part of the human condition, allowing us to remain fundamentally critical of the negative societal consequences that it causes, and delineate distinct parts of the human condition that are radically not artificial?*

In trying to answer this question, the next chapter will start by briefly defining anarcho-primitivism, followed by an analysis of John Zerzan's conception of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle as being uncontested for over a million years. Next, the genesis of symbolic culture and the myth of progress will be discussed to explain how and why humanity moved away from this hunter-gatherer life. In the final parts of the chapter, anarcho-primitivism will be critiqued more thoroughly by having a closer look at the idea of primitive affluence and the classical anarchists' critique of anarcho-primitivism. The third chapter will be devoted to discussing Theodore Kaczynski ideas using his two main inspirations: Desmond Morris and Jacques Ellul. Through the lens of these authors, the previous analysis of civilization critique will be deepened, focusing on the phenomenon of modern technology and the impact of living in complex societies on the individual. Additionally, in contrasting the ideas of Ellul with those of Kaczynski, some ideas will be presented that might explain why the latter resorted to terrorism. The fourth chapter will center around Helmuth Plessner magnum opus entitled *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*. First, Plessner's typology of life will be presented, after which the excentric positionality of the human level will be discussed in more detail through Plessner's three anthropological laws. These being: The law of natural artificiality, which states that man cannot simply be natural like other living beings, but needs an artificial complement to act as a counterbalance to the excentric core of its being;²³ the law of mediated immediacy, which states that because man is aware of its mediated relationship with its environment through its excentric viewpoint, it tries to overcome this mediation through creative action;²⁴ and the third law of the utopian standpoint, which states that as man is aware of its rootlessness through its excentricity, it seeks an anchor in the utopian ideals of religion or ideology.²⁵

The fifth and final chapter will make an attempt to synthesize Plessner's view of the human condition as being fundamentally artificial and broken with the anarcho-primitivists' wholesale critique of civilization. This will be done by arguing that, according to Plessner, man is a three-fold being able to exist in all three levels of organic life. In the lower two levels of its being, man is immediately integrated in and part of its environment. These two levels can be roughly compared to the unalienated life that anarcho-primitivists ascribe to prehistoric hunter-gatherers. The third excentric level gives man the experience of being broken from itself and its environment, making man attempt to become whole again through artificial mediation. The societal consequences of man's attempts at becoming whole again are the things that the anarcho-primitivists criticize, such as culture, ideology and modern technology.

In trying to mend the brokenness in the excentric level of its being, man creates an environment where its immediate connection with nature through the lower two levels of its being is hindered, as it no longer lives a fully autonomous life integrated in nature where it has the opportunity to be and have a body. I will argue, mainly through the synthesis of Zerzan's and Plessner's work, that the human being is able to fundamentally confront the source of one's brokenness without aimlessly, and with false justification, escaping towards increasingly hollow and artificial meditations as its only solution.

²³ Plessner, *Levels*, 288.

²⁴ Plessner, *Levels*, 301.

²⁵ Plessner, *Levels*, 317.

2. Anarcho-primitivism and related critique of civilization

2.1 Mystifying the primitive: Zerzan on the hunter-gatherer lifestyle

In arguably his most influential essay entitled *Future Primitive*, Zerzan lays out the development of the human species from living in a band society to living in a civilization.²⁶ Using archaeological, anthropological and anecdotal evidence gathered from primitive or contemporary hunter-gatherer societies,²⁷ he argues for the contingent nature of our current alienated society. He states that contrary to the ideas of hardship and gloom that have been taught to us about primitive societies, they were actually far better off than we are now. He states that anthropological evidence shows us “that life before domestication/agriculture was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health. This was our human nature, for a couple of million years, prior to enslavement by priests, kings, and bosses.”²⁸

Zerzan’s description of primitive life starts off with the idea that before the introduction of division of labor and agriculture, the different *Homo* species lived as hunter-gatherer societies. He supports the food sharing hypothesis, stating that what set primitive humans apart from violent apes and modern humans, is the fact that they shared food amongst their band. One might argue against this cooperation hypothesis with the example of chimpanzees that do partake in food sharing,²⁹ but also have shown generalized violent and war-like tendencies, which Jane Goodall first described in her telling of the Gombe Chimpanzee War.³⁰ The cause of this war has been traced to the rivalry between three male chimpanzees compounded by a shortage of fertile females.³¹ This ties into another foundation of human cooperation according to Zerzan. He argues that the disappearance of displays of sexual dimorphism such as large male canines “strongly suggests that the female of the species exercised a selection for sociable, sharing males.”³² Further support for this idea is found in the intergroup behavior displayed by a species of ape that show even less sexual dimorphism than humans: The gibbon.³³ Although a majority of the intergroup encounters between groups of gibbons were antagonistic, they did not result in serious injuries or deaths, as is seen with chimpanzees.³⁴

Zerzan’s cooperation thesis and other opposing theories, such as the killer ape theory which suggests that increased interpersonal aggression is what makes us uniquely human, completely neglect the potential effect cultural plasticity might have on aggressive tendencies. Even geographically distinct chimpanzees groups showed significant differences in aggression,³⁵ and the behaviors of geographically distinct groups

²⁶ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*.

²⁷ Zerzan himself uses the term gatherer-hunters in favor of the more widely accepted hunter-gatherers. Most likely to highlight that he is of the opinion that primitive man did very little hunting.

²⁸ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 2.

²⁹ Liran Samuni, et al., *Social Bonds facilitate cooperative resource sharing in wild chimpanzees*. Proceedings of the Royal Society 285(1888), 2018.

³⁰ Jane Goodall, *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe*, Mariner Books, 2010.

³¹ Michael L. Wilson, et al., *Lethal aggression in Pan is better explained by adaptive strategies than human impacts*, Nature 513, 414-417, 2014.

³² Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 3.

³³ *Sexual Dimorphism and Mating System* [Lecture Notes], University of Missouri-Columbia, 2004, Accessed via: <https://web.missouri.edu/~flinnm/courses/mah/lectures/sd.htm>.

³⁴ Thad Q. Bartlett, *Intragroup and Intergroup Social Interactions in White-Handed Gibbons*, International Journal of Primatology 24(2), 239-259, 2003.

³⁵ Michael L. Wilson, et al., *Lethal aggression in Pan is better explained by adaptive strategies than human impacts*, Nature 513, 414-417, 2014.

of orangutans have also been linked to cultural plasticity.³⁶ Primatologist Frans de Waal notes that cooperation and empathy are not exclusive to humans but are traits shared amongst all mammals. On distinguishing man from ape, he states: "We start out postulating sharp boundaries, such as between humans and apes, or between apes and monkeys, but are in fact dealing with sand castles that lose much of their structure when the sea of knowledge washes over them."³⁷ Although it is difficult to infer the intergroup behaviour of early man, the low sexual dimorphism and the mammalian propensity for pro-social behaviour provide some biological underpinnings for Zerzan's conception of hunter-gatherers living in harmonious communities.

Another part of Zerzan's conception is that early man did little hunting and instead gathered most of its food. The hunting hypothesis, on the other hand, states that humans evolved as a result of hunting large and fast animals. In support of this theory, David Buss suggests that human physiology is adapted to a meat-heavy diet.³⁸ He states that whereas an ape's intestinal tract consists mostly of colon, human intestines are for the most part made up of the small intestine, which would aid in the increased protein absorption necessary for a meat-heavy diet. Buss, furthermore, states that the relatively small layer of enamel covering the teeth of prehistoric humans compared to apes, and the lack of significant wear and tear characteristic of a plant-heavy diet, provide further arguments in favor of the hunting hypotheses. It must be noted here that the difference in intestinal makeup and enamel coating does not necessarily point towards a big game hunting in prehistoric man, but could also be evidence of a lifestyle with access to higher quality foods.³⁹ Whereas most apes' diet consists for a large part of lower quality plant materials that need to be fermented in the hindgut in order to extract its nutrients, prehistoric humans had the ability to cook and had access to an "abundance of animal products through scavenging, hunting, fishing, and dairy consumption."⁴⁰

In further support of the hunting hypothesis, Buss looks at contemporary hunter-gatherer populations, mainly the Aka pygmies in the Central African Republic and the !Kung in Botswana, and finds that their diet is provided through roughly 50% hunting. Zerzan studies similar contemporary hunter-gatherers, including the !Kung people, and notes that although they eat more meat than their prehistoric forebears, their diet is still mostly plant-based.⁴¹ Throughout his analysis of contemporary hunter-gatherers, he notes a difference between on the one hand the lifestyle of prehistoric band societies, which consisted of small groups of humans who mainly lived off what they gathered from the land for over a million years, and the tribal societies that emerged only later. Although the contemporary hunter-gatherers studied by anthropologists only sprung into existence relatively recently, they still offer a glimpse into human life before division of labor and domestication according to Zerzan. Based on anthropological literature, he describes societies like that of the !Kung, although not completely unspoiled, as having a more varied and healthier diet, consisting mostly of different plant species, leading to less chronic disease, incredibly acute senses, an absence of degenerative diseases and mental disabilities, no inter- or intra group aggression or competition, a more open view to sexuality, equality amongst the sexes, little to no division of labor, democratic decisions making, an abundance of leisure time, and maybe most importantly a high degree of personal accountability and autonomy. Some of Zerzan's sources that seem to be anecdotal in nature, even describe mythical qualities to these tribal societies, ranging from killing a leopard with bare hands and

³⁶ Michael Krützen, et al., *Culture and geographic variation in orangutan behavior*, Current Biology 21(21), 1808-1812, 2011.

³⁷ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's lessons for a kinder society*, Harmony Books, 149, 2009.

³⁸ David Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind*, Allyn & Bacon, 76. 1999.

³⁹ Paul A. Watkins, *Identification of differences in human and great ape phytanic acid metabolism that could influence gene expression profiles and physiological functions*, BMC Physiology 10(1), 1-10, 2010.

⁴⁰ Watkins, *Identification of difference*, 2.

⁴¹ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 13.

crushing iron nails with bare teeth, to the ability to see distant celestial bodies with the naked eye in bright daylight.⁴²

Zerzan's argument is appealing, the people living in band and even tribal societies would likely have more autonomy, and the increased accountability that stems from being intimately familiar with all members of society would decrease the likelihood of power imbalances, such as one hunter being more skilled than all others, to be exploited. Zerzan's timeline, however, seems shaky. In emphasizing the long stretch humans lived in gathering band societies, he argues that hunting only began to form an important part of human lifestyle around 100,000 years ago⁴³, whereas signs of large game hunting were already present with the *Homo Erectus* living at least 1.4 million years ago.⁴⁴ This and other instances where Zerzan presents an alternative timeline, such as with the evolution of human intelligence and culture that we will see in 2.2, do not derail his general argument, but they do offer an easy opportunity for critics to dismiss his work as overly romanticized, as we will see in 2.5. More importantly, Zerzan's timeline has a chance to confuse the origins of complex societies with early consequences of these societies, such as division of labor, which will be discussed in 2.2.

One common criticism leveled against those that argue the superior lifestyle of prehistoric humans compared to their modern counterparts, is the low average life expectancy apparent in contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes and deduced from prehistoric human remains. From prehistoric times up until the 1800s, average human life expectancy was around 30, more than doubling in two centuries to the current number of around 72.⁴⁵ Early anthropologists used this and archeological evidence to suggest that prehistoric life was, as best described in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "poor, nasty, brutish, and short."⁴⁶ It is important to note here that a large part of the difference in life expectancy is due to the high infant mortality rate in earlier societies.⁴⁷ When we eliminate this aspect, which has been helped by better hygiene standards and improved medical technology, from the equation, we find evidence to suggest that the life expectancy for those in a hunter-gatherer society that reach adulthood is similar to today, being around seven decades.⁴⁸ There are also rising concerns stemming from the contemporary comforts of society that might shorten overall life expectancy, such as is the case with obesity.⁵⁰

The early archeologists were not entirely mistaken, however, as some practices and aspects of the lifestyles found in contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes would likely be considered brutish by inhabitants of modern industrial society. A prime example of this may be found in the !Kung people that Zerzan admires greatly for their relatively unspoiled way of life. Zerzan praises the !Kung female population's ability to control their own ovulation. !Kung women have only one child every three or four years, even though no birth control is unavailable, and they do not abstain from intercourse during this period. They space these births for multiple reasons. First, it is to make sure that every child can be breastfed until the age of three in favor

⁴² Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 13-14.

⁴³ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 13.

⁴⁴ Ken Richardson, *Genes, brains, and human potential: The science and ideology of intelligence*, Columbia University Press, 265, 2017.

⁴⁵ Max Roser, et al., *Life Expectancy*, Our World in Data, 2019, Accessed via: <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>.

⁴⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, 97, 1965.

⁴⁷ Henri V. Vallois, *The Social Life of Early Man: The Evidence of Skeletons*, in Washburn, Sherwood L., *Social Life of Early Man*, Routledge, 417-458, 1962.

⁴⁸ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Life Expectancy" – What does this actually mean?, Our World in Data, 2017, Accessed via: <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy-how-is-it-calculated-and-how-should-it-be-interpreted>.

⁴⁹ Brea McCauley, *Life expectancy in hunter-gatherers*, Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science, 2018.

⁵⁰ Nikoletta Vidra, et al., *Impact of obesity on life expectancy among different European countries: Secondary analysis of population-level data over the 1975–2012 period*, *Bmj Open* 9(7), 2019.

of harder bush foods that are difficult to digest for a developing child. Besides that, population control and the emotional stress of children below the age of three of not having the complete attention of their mother, are also considered.⁵¹ On the mechanism behind this ability, Zerzan states: “What seems a very plausible explanation is based on the fact that undomesticated people are very much more in tune with their physical selves. Foraging women's senses and processes are not alienated from themselves or dulled; control over childbearing is probably less than mysterious to those whose bodies are not foreign objects to be acted upon.”⁵² Evidence suggest, however, that this birth spacing is actually a result of on the one hand the release of a certain hormone caused by a “vigorous sucking-of a kind that is regular, frequent, and occurs round the clock”⁵³, but is on the other hand also made sure of through the act of infanticide, and has little to do with a certain unalienated attunement of these women when it comes to their bodies.⁵⁴ Some anarcho-primitivists, like Jason Godesky, argue that our objection to infanticide merely comes from our conception of when life starts. He states that hunter-gatherers usually deem the beginning of life to be around the age of two, and that it is in some sense no different from abortions in the western world. In the recollection of a story of how her brother almost succumbed to infanticide, a !Kung woman describes how after her mother had been persuaded to not kill the child, her father stated that she would have killed her mother if she had gone through with killing the child.⁵⁵ This would seemingly go against Zerzan's claims, stating that the !Kung people and other hunter-gatherers strongly disliked violence and fighting and would shy away from it at almost every occasion.⁵⁶

Although Zerzan makes some fantastical claims on the abilities of unalienated man, these do not take away from his core argument. Zerzan's argument of early man living a more autonomous life remains, furthermore, unaffected by the largely contestable claims of poorer quality of life and brutish elements being common to early societies. It remains important, however, to mention these romanticized elements of Zerzan's arguments, as they form part of his overarching theory in which he seems to deny that there are elements within man that see us purposefully wanting to move towards civilization and away from this more unspoiled state. This will become more clear when we discuss Zerzan's account of symbolic culture next.

2.2 The root of all woes: Zerzan on the emergence of symbolic culture

After describing the original state of human society according to Zerzan, we may now turn to how he thinks the course of human society has led us to our modern alienated world. Zerzan starts his history of humanity roughly 2.5 million years ago with the *Homo habilis* named after its tool usage.⁵⁷ He goes on to state the archeo-physiological evidence suggesting that these early humans were of similar intelligence to modern man, and that human species arriving later such as the *Homo erectus*, appearing 1.75 million years ago, are anatomically and behaviorally hard to distinguish from modern humans.⁵⁸ He concludes that one “must now contend with recent work depicting complete human intelligence as present virtually with the

⁵¹ Richard B. Lee, *Lactation, Ovulation, Infanticide and Women's Work*, in Cohen, Mark Nathan, Biosocial Mechanisms of Population Regulation, University Press, 321-348, 1980.

⁵² Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 19.

⁵³ Lee, *Lactation, Ovulation, Infanticide and Women's Work*, 342.

⁵⁴ Lee, *Lactation, Ovulation, Infanticide and Women's Work*, 334.

⁵⁵ Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

⁵⁶ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 16.

⁵⁷ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 4.

⁵⁸ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 6.

birth of the *Homo* species.”⁵⁹ Although few and often incomplete remains have been found of the earlier *Homo* species, significant anatomical differences between can be identified, such as the *Homo erectus* possessing larger teeth and a smaller cranial capacity compared to modern humans. Zerzan’s claim that *Homo* species are hard to distinguish behaviorally is problematic, as the scant archeological evidence is hardly sufficient to make such claims. Furthermore, even if these *Homo* species were anatomically hard to distinguish, this does not have to mean that they possess similar intelligence. In his book *Genes, Brains, and Human Potential: The Science and Ideology of Intelligence*, Ken Richardson argues that the discourse on intelligence suffers from brain reductionism and a too big focus on evolutionary causes for cognitive development. He argues that modern humans possess more cognitive ability than necessary for a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and that an increase in social cooperation and culture provided the context for rapid cognitive evolution in *Homo Sapiens*.⁶⁰ This would mean that modern humans’ extraordinary intelligence developed relatively late. This idea suggests that human intelligence might have developed not only through passive ecological pressures, but also through intentional (cultural) niche construction, which in turn would have created the selection pressures that would favor genetic mutation in humans.⁶¹ An example of this mechanism may be found in how the domestication of cows has created the selection pressures for humans to be able to digest dairy into adulthood.⁶² In short, in shaping its environment, humankind has shaped itself, an idea that we will return to with Desmond Morris.

With his view on the evolution of intelligence Zerzan takes the first step towards arguing that man had been able to form complex and domesticated societies but intentionally refused to do so.⁶³ He states: “We lived for 2,000,000 years without civilization and people got along very well.”⁶⁴ Here again, in taking a somewhat hyperbolic view of human history he opens himself up to criticism that does not have to entertain his main argument. Even if the band society as Zerzan envisions only existed from the dawn of the *Homo sapiens* 300.000 years ago and its process towards civilization was a more diverse and gradual one, as anthropologists like Steven Kuhn state,⁶⁵ it does not take away from the current destructive elements of human behavior that Zerzan seeks to draw our attention to, or the idea of a band society intimately connected with nature, as a way of living that makes these destructive elements more difficult to manifest. This being said, Zerzan argues that human life began to change at the end of the Paleolithic. He points to division of labor as a reasonable hypothesis for the move towards civilization. Whereas before in a smaller band society, a human being had full autonomy and partook in all actions needed to sustain their life, now, gradually, in a growing and complex tribal society, a human life is confined to one particular task. This is the root of oppression in society according to Zerzan, and is the start of a distinction we think of as common throughout the prehistoric world, where men hunt and women gather. Zerzan uses division of labor as a way of determining which forms of technology are permissible and non-alienating. He concludes:

⁵⁹ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 6.

⁶⁰ Richardson, *Genes, brains, and human potential*, 266.

⁶¹ Kevin N. Laland, et al., *How culture shaped the human genome: bringing genetics and the human sciences together*, Nature Reviews Genetics 11, 137-148, 2010.

⁶² Pascale Gerbault, et al., *Evolution of lactase persistence: an example of human niche construction*, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 366(1566), 863-877, 2011.

⁶³ John Zerzan, *Number: Its Origin and Evolution*, accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100618100924/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/number.htm>.

⁶⁴ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist Who Wants Us All to Give Up Technology*, Vice, 2014, Accessed via: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dpxw3m/john-zerzan-wants-us-to-give-up-all-of-our-technology>.

⁶⁵ Steven L. Kuhn, *Signaling theory and technologies of communication in the Paleolithic*, Biological Theory 9(1), 48, 2014.

*"I think one very general way to look at it is division of labor. If you have a tool that anybody can make, that's great. You're in contact with it in a very sensual way. But tools that require a hierarchy of coordination and specialization create a kind of distancing. That's the kind of technology to avoid."*⁶⁶

In some sense, through division of labor a part of one's humanity is taken away through the loss of being completely and intimately connected to nature and autonomous within it. In general, it seems that for Zerzan when an individual becomes part of a complex human organization, they lose more than they gain. One of the more problematic consequences of this division of labor is the dawn of rituals, signaling the start of symbolic culture, and the breach with nature. On rituals Zerzan states:

*"Ritual, as shamanic practice, may also be considered as a regression from that state in which all shared a consciousness we would now classify as extrasensory. When specialists alone claim access to such perceptual heights as may have once been communal, further backward moves in division of labor are facilitated or enhanced. The way back to bliss through ritual is a virtually universal mythic theme, promising the dissolution of measurable time, among other joys. This theme of ritual points to an absence that it falsely claims to fill, as does symbolic culture in general."*⁶⁷

In this way rituals impose a cultural ordering of the wild. The female, for example, is seen as a specific cultural category, being associated with chaos, seduction, and a myriad of other connotations. Whoever holds the authority over the rituals and their meaning can use this to steer society and its people in whatever way they so please. In short, the surrender of autonomous access to a shared higher consciousness found through a connection with nature creates a power imbalance by putting a select few specialists in the position to define truth and meaning for an entire group of people. Zerzan calls this process the self-domestication of man. A prime historical manifestation of this cultural mechanism is the interpretation of religious scriptures by specialists that leads to prosecution, as with the witch trials of the late medieval and early modern times, or acts of terrorism, as seen more recently with extremists groups like The Islamic State. The ever more symbolic cultural expressions, having imposed certain distinctions and hierarchies in the world, eventually also led to the ability to domesticate plants and animals in our surroundings. This domestication of the world around us started with the systematic hunting of larger animals, as becomes apparent through the earliest figurative cave art illustrating hunting scenes.⁶⁸ Zerzan states: "The non-domesticated typically view the animals they hunt as equals; this essentially egalitarian relationship is ended by the advent of domestication".⁶⁹ This in turn moved to a more direct domestication of animals, with the first instantiations of this being the domestication of the wolf around 15,000 years ago. This then progressed to cultivation of plants and the start of the agricultural revolution around 10,000 years ago.

Zerzan describes how the increasing domestication of plants and animals allowed for a sedentary lifestyle which resulted in a large and dense population centered around these means of domestication, which in turn allowed for a more rigorous division of labor. It also created the need for numbers⁷⁰, and (reified) time. Zerzan argues that the idea of linear time creates an artificial structure or cage around human experience.

⁶⁶ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist Who Wants Us All to Give Up Technology*, Vice, 2014, Accessed via: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dpxw3m/john-zerzan-wants-us-to-give-up-all-of-our-technology>.

⁶⁷ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 9-10.

⁶⁸ Maxime Aubert, et al., *Earliest hunting scene in prehistoric art*, Nature 576(7787), 442-445, 2019.

⁶⁹ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 16.

⁷⁰ John Zerzan, *Number: Its Origin and Evolution*, accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100618100924/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/number.htm>.

He states that “time as a materiality is not inherent in reality, but a cultural imposition, perhaps the first cultural imposition, on it. As this elemental dimension of symbolic culture progresses, so does, by equal steps, alienation from the natural.”⁷¹ Through this invention of time as something linear, the idea of progress was born.⁷²

Moreover, the domestication of land necessary for the cultivation of plants and animals also leads to the concept of ownership. Zerzan’s idea is echoed in Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. In the fifth chapter of the second essay, Locke argues that indigenous Americans and Europeans have been given the same natural boons, but notes that an indigenous American king lives in the same luxury as a common English laborer.⁷³ He states this is because of the work Europeans have put in their land and its resources compared to the indigenous Americans, who hardly cultivate their land, as they only use what nature gives them directly. Locke goes on to state that everything one puts work in becomes their property, by picking up the acorn it becomes one’s own, by cultivating the land it becomes one’s own. Although Locke argues that defining property by what we put our labor on disables us to take more than we might need, as if we appropriate too many acorns they simply perish, it is apparent that following his reasoning enables agricultural societies to appropriate the land for their own use that was previously used by hunter-gatherer societies to gather their sustenance. Theodore Kaczynski adds to Zerzan’s argument that the mostly nomadic hunter-gatherers could not afford to own more than they could reasonably carry around, as they traveled extensively.⁷⁴ Following the invention of ownership through agriculture the material basis for social hierarchy is created according to Zerzan,⁷⁵ where one possesses more than the other, instead of all boons of nature being a part of and for everyone. This coincides with the first evidence for increased stratification in social hierarchies having been found around the time of the dawn of agriculture.⁷⁶

Concurrent with these changes, the first archeological possible evidence of warfare is also dated to around 10,000 years ago.⁷⁷ Zerzan concludes:

“Selfdomestication through language, ritual, and art inspired the taming of plants and animals that followed. Appearing only 10,000 years ago, farming quickly triumphed; for control, by its very nature, invites intensification. Once the will to production broke through, it became more productive the more efficiently it was exercised, and hence more ascendant and adaptive. Agriculture enables greatly increased division of labor, establishes the material foundations of social hierarchy, and initiates environmental destruction. Priests, kings, drudgery, sexual inequality, warfare are a few of its fairly immediate specific consequences.”⁷⁸

Zerzan’s timeline is appealing. It combines with his idea on the evolution of human intelligence to explain how something like agriculture could only manifest after a “slowly accelerating alienation in the form of division of labor and symbolization.”⁷⁹ It does a poor job, however, at explaining why symbolic culture, and agriculture specifically, was adopted when it came with so many negative consequences. In his essay

⁷¹ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 7.

⁷² John Zerzan, Time and its Discontents, Anarchy: A journal of desire armed 39, 1994.

⁷³ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1823, 122, Accessed via:

<https://www.yorku.ca/comminel/courses/3025pdf/Locke.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Theodore John Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, in Kaczynski, Theodore John. *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski*, a.k.a. “The Unabomber”, Feral House, 149, 2010.

⁷⁵ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 11.

⁷⁶ Judith Thurman, *The World’s Oldest Crown*, The New Yorker, 2014, Accessed via:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-worlds-oldest-crown>.

⁷⁷ Martha Mirazon Lahr, et al., *Inter-group violence among early Holocene hunter-gatherers of West Turkana, Kenya*, Nature 529, 394-398, 2016.

⁷⁸ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 10.

⁷⁹ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 11.

The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race, Jared Diamond provides a simple and compelling answer:

"Of course they adopted it because agriculture is an efficient way to get more food for less work. Planted crops yield far more tons per acre than roots and berries. Just imagine a band of savages, exhausted from searching for nuts or chasing wild animals, suddenly gazing for the first time at a fruit laden orchard or a pasture full of sheep. How many milliseconds do you think it would take them to appreciate the advantages of agriculture?"⁸⁰

Biologically speaking we are wired to enjoy and look for things that would best ensure our survival and that of our group in the most energy-efficient way, flowing from this we find that humans, just like all other animals, gain pleasure from comfort and rest. Just as a bird seeks to build a protective and warm nest for its offspring, as a herd of grazers seeks to find the most succulent pastures, early humans undoubtedly looked forward to coming back from the hunt and enjoying the spoils of their endeavors around the fire. In this way, division of daily labor and the transfer of rituals to specialists provided a convenient, certain and well-structured way of life. This would have come at a great cost but probably not one that was immediately apparent. Zerzan does not shine nearly enough light on this aspect in my opinion, and instead tries to sketch some sort of Marxist scheme where most humans, living connected with nature, (unsuccessfully) resisted the few that sought to domesticate the world and fellow man.⁸¹ This way of thinking denies the need in all humans to domesticate the world and themselves to at least some degree in order to ensure survival. I do not argue, however, that domestication in all its aspects is good because it stems from a place within us, but I do find that the hard disintinction between nature and alienated culture that Zerzan proposes, obscures the origins of this alienation somewhat, and potentially opens the door to eco-terrorism as we shall see in chapter three.

2.3 The Myth of Progress

Zerzan illustrates well how the ordering of our lives and the world around us can be taken to extremes that are damaging. In his book *A Short History of Progress*, Ronald Wright argues similarly that as societies past and present accumulate luxuries through the collection of natural resources using technological adaptations, they will inevitably reach a point where their technological methods of accumulation become unsustainable and the natural resources become depleted as a result. He gives the example of the prehistoric hunt for megafauna: "Palaeolithic hunters who learnt how to kill two mammoths instead of one had made progress. Those who learnt how to kill 200 - by driving a whole herd over a cliff - had made too much. They lived high for a while, then starved."⁸² According to Wright, this progress trap gave way to a second more expansive progress trap, namely agriculture. Agriculture allowed for the sustaining of vast populations at the cost of the environment. He argues that the overtaxed system will eventually collapse when the resources run dry and the harmony of the environment is irrevocably damaged.

Wright places a high importance on the human use of technology to bring the environment out of balance. He also states that continual technological advancements have made humanity able to stave off complete

⁸⁰ Jared M. Diamond, *The worst mistake in the history of the human race*, Oplopanax Publishing, 2, 2010.

⁸¹ John Zerzan, *Number: Its Origin and Evolution*, accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100618100924/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/number.htm>.

⁸² Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, House of Anansi Press, 5, 2011.

environmental collapse for now. Zerzan sees this too but highlights the sociological impact of technology. He states, along similar lines to Michel Foucault, that the industrial revolution and its products not only had economic utility but served to impose discipline.⁸³ On technology Zerzan states: “Technology is the sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of those separations mediating us from each other. It is all the drudgery and toxicity required to produce and reproduce the stage of hyper-alienation we languish in. It is the texture and the form of domination at any given stage of hierarchy and domination.”⁸⁴ This parallels Jacques Ellul’s idea of technique that will be discussed in chapter three. Zerzan gives the example of the telephone.⁸⁵ Although it provides an immediate and convenient way of connecting with people, the connection is a lot thinner through mediation, lacking any physical proximity to the one you wish to connect to, meaning that the technology can in the end be more alienating than connective according to Zerzan. Wright differs from Zerzan in seeing the never-ending desire for progress stemming from an innately human predisposition to inventiveness, violence and excess. As stated, Zerzan does not acknowledge that progress might have an innate aspect to it.

Zerzan also notes that in increasingly complex societies the use of this advanced alienating technology is no longer optional, as we cannot contribute or partake in society otherwise. Zerzan himself describes how even he cannot escape this faith, as he had to make an email account in order to be able to spread his message, as sending letters to specific institutions at one point became no longer possible.⁸⁶ He states that in order to be part of the conversation in society he has to use his tools and thus cannot live in the wilderness. He also admits that even if this was not holding him back, he would still have a very hard time living in the wild himself as he is not trained to do so.⁸⁷ These particular observations highlight a strong aspect of Zerzan’s theory. Hitherto the question on why social complex societies and technologies were adopted has been met with their increased ability to meet material needs. This neglects that these changes happen over many generations making their negative consequences hard to distinguish. It, furthermore, neglects that the overwhelming majority of people today are not given an alternative to living in civilization; it is given as fact. This becomes more true the more complex and all-encompassing civilization becomes. From birth one is raised to live in civilization and afterward one can go virtually nowhere without being bound by the culturally imposed rules and customs of that region. This also shows us why Zerzan does not wish to assign any need for something akin civilization to our nature. If we accept it as necessary in some way, we take the suffering it causes as necessary too, and are no longer able to critique civilization to its foundations. Still, I hope to argue in the course of this thesis that a synthesis can be achieved between a foundational critique of civilization and the idea that the origins, and maybe even necessity, of civilization can be found in human nature.

Zerzan’s own use of technology has not been limited to being a way to transmit his ideas. In a 1995 article with the New York Times, the interviewer points out that a television set is present in Zerzan’s apartment, to which he replies that “like other people, I have to be narcotized.”⁸⁸ Inferring that living in an alienated society, one is doomed to fill this void with entertainment. This point would be somewhat understandable if he was just as understanding about others’ use of technology as well. When the anti-tech writer and convicted domestic terrorist Theodore Kaczynski, whose ideas will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter, killed three people using mail bombs, Zerzan showed little sympathy for the victims. On the one

⁸³ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist*.

⁸⁴ John Zerzan, *The Nihilist’s Dictionary*, in Zerzan, John. Future Primitive Revisited, Feral House, 91, 2012.

⁸⁵ Nielsen, *Praxis* 25.

⁸⁶ Nielsen, *Praxis* 25.

⁸⁷ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist*.

⁸⁸ Kenneth B. Noble, *Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber* [Newspaper article May 7, 1995], New York Times, 1995.

hand he states it is unfortunate that violence is needed to bring attention to anti-tech ideas and finds that it is not the best way to do it,⁸⁹ on the other hand he argues that Kaczynski's victims, who worked in positions having to do with technology, were not innocent⁹⁰ and that it might be unethical to not stop these individuals who "are bringing an unprecedented assault on life."⁹¹ Could one not say, following Zerzan's own reasoning, that these individuals are also merely trying to fill the void that an alienated society has created with some sense of meaning through their profession? Who is to draw the line between what usage of technology is permissible under the guise of dealing with living in this society and what usage is an intentionally disruptive action? Social theorist and anarchist/communalist Murray Bookchin draws a hard line here, calling Zerzan disingenuous and sanctimonious for using advanced technology to generate anti-technological literature whilst at the same time condemning this technology.⁹² Although I would argue that Zerzan is hypocritical in painting the advancers of technology as villainous whilst deciding to spend his spare time using said technology, I do not agree with Bookchin that using technology to generate anti-technological literature is disingenuous. This neglects that an individual can have needs and goals that conflict even if one is far more vital and important to the person. The same may be true for me at this very moment, as I am writing this thesis, an activity that requires concentration and has delayed gratification, I am constantly tempted by the immediate and convenient gratification offered by the use of my smartphone. Although the gratification achieved from writing a thesis is much greater and more sustainable, I still fall victim to the lure of instant and lesser gratification on occasion.

2.4 Primitive affluence: Ecology vs culture

In his wholesale critique of symbolic culture, Zerzan dismisses that any form of symbolic culture might produce a more fulfilling life for the individual and a harmonious relation with its environment. Part of the reason for this might be that he based his description of prehistoric band societies on the original affluent society as described by Marshall Sahlins, who only considered ecological factors in his analysis.⁹³ In his book *Stone Age Economics* Sahlins goes out to debunk the idea that prehistoric societies were always on the brink of starvation and suffered a brutish existence.⁹⁴ Using data collected from contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, he surmises that the people in these types of societies worked around three to five hours a day to collect their sustenance. He goes on to state that even though they had an abundance of leisure time, these societies were unable to accumulate vast material wealth as they were constrained by their environment.

By studying the Nayaka, Batek and Mbuti hunter-gatherer tribes, Nurit Bird-David criticizes Sahlins' explanation of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle as being merely a necessary consequence of ecological constraints.⁹⁵ She starts her cultural reformulation of Sahlins by dissecting Shalins' hard distinction between work and leisure time. Although this distinction might be relatively easy to make in most Western societies, it is hard to apply to hunter-gatherer tribes that she has studied. The hunting sessions of Mbuti

⁸⁹ Noble, *Prominent Anarchist*.

⁹⁰ Brian Oliver Sheppard, *Anarchism vs. Primitivism*, See Sharp Press, 2003.

⁹¹ John Zerzan, *Whose Unabomber?*, 1995, Accessed via:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100618101228/http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/whoseunabomber.htm>.

⁹² Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, AK Press, 49, 1995.

⁹³ Nielsen, *Praxis 24*.

⁹⁴ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, Aldine Atherton, 1972.

⁹⁵ Nurit Bird-David, "The Original Affluent Society": A Culturalist Reformulation, *Current Anthropology* 33(1), 25, 1992.

people, for example, are performed at such a leisurely pace, that the elderly and infants may join, and ample time is made to socialize, share snacks, flirt and play with the infants, effectively blurring the line between work and leisure time.⁹⁶ Sahlins, furthermore, uses only the activities related to gathering of food to calculate the amount of work one does in a day. This point is also brought up by Theodore Kaczynski. Although Kaczynski agrees that hunter-gatherer societies possessed many positive attributes,⁹⁷ he argues, mostly based on his own experiences of living in the wild, that Sahlin does not mention the considerable time it takes to prepare the food that has been gathered.⁹⁸ He also remarks that food preparation is usually not a very pleasant endeavor: “Preparing such foods for use is very often a pain in the neck. It is far more pleasant to gather nuts, dig roots, or hunt game than it is to crack nuts, clean roots, or skin and butcher game—or to collect firewood and cook over an open fire.”⁹⁹ He argues that even in the most fertile regions it is unlikely that one could live and raise a family there by living off the land with less than forty hours of labor every week.

Bird-David uses two cultural propositions posed by Sahlins in earlier works to construct a more complete analysis of hunter-gatherer economies.¹⁰⁰ The outcome of this is a metaphorical model that she sees recurring in almost all contemporary hunter-gatherer societies. She calls this model the cosmic economy of sharing.¹⁰¹ She describes how tribes living with this metaphorical model ascribe humanlike qualities to nature and actively socialize with nature and its agents, like spirits, through song and dance. They see themselves as children of nature and expect nature to provide a fair share for all its children equally, free of charge. They might still complain about hunger and other desires, but would not expect nature to produce more than they can see and find when walking through the forest. The sharing that happens between nature and humans, which is also reflected in the sharing between humans, is not given value through what is shared, but through the sharing itself as a way for humans to connect with nature and other humans, and as a means to provide context and events for socializing.

Bird-David concludes that the difference between modern hunter-gatherer and western economies may be explained through the metaphorical models used to shape the world around us. Whereas western economies may be understood through scarcity, where a mechanistic view of nature leads to the idea that resources are depleting over time as human agents use them, hunter-gatherer economies might be understood through abundance, where one always expects their fair share being provided by nature regardless of what they already possess. This difference explains how a mechanistic view of nature contributes to the destruction of ecosystems by seeing nature as nothing more than what Heidegger calls a standing reserve instead of a living agent, where one’s fair share is not provided by nature but is claimed or taken from it, before all resources are depleted.

Bird-David’s analysis challenges Zerzan’s idea that symbolic culture is alienating per se, as in ascribing human-like qualities to nature through cultural processes an immediate connection with nature is forged. Although this observation adds more nuance to Zerzan’s argument, it might only apply to smaller societies that are integrated in nature to such a degree that a distinction between what is nature and what is not seems arbitrary. As soon as cities arose and people were able to live their lives completely separated from direct contact with the undomesticated wild, a distinction could arise. They could see themselves as distinct from nature and could therefore domesticate it. In this way, Bird-David’s cultural

⁹⁶ Bird-David, “The Original Affluent Society”, 30.

⁹⁷ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 129.

⁹⁸ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 129-130.

⁹⁹ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 130.

¹⁰⁰ Bird-David, “The Original Affluent Society”, 27.

¹⁰¹ Bird-David, “The Original Affluent Society”, 29.

reformulation seems in turn to be ecologically informed. Still, Bird-David's analysis bodes hope for even the most artificial and domesticated societies, as even the tiniest lived experience of how one is in a constant reciprocal relationship with their environment could dissolve the distinction between nature and culture yet again.

2.5 Anarchist critique: Is technology or capitalism to blame?

In similar lines to Bird-David, some anarchist thinkers criticize the anarcho-primitivists for seeking the cause of the problems that contemporary society faces in civilization as a whole. Murray Bookchin states that by deeming technology and civilization to be inherently oppressive, the social relationships that are unique to capitalism are obscured, which he deems are responsible for these predicaments.¹⁰² Bird-David expresses these social relationships by reiterating the words of economist John Kenneth Galbraith: "The way to the really affluent society lies in an ideological disengagement between production and economic security and between production and income."¹⁰³ In the second edition of his book *The Affluent Society* Galbraith argues that in modern capitalist societies production has to be run at its capacity to ensure that workers are provided with income and economic security. It is not so much the case, he argues, that society will miss the goods that are not made when production is decreased, the problem is that "to falter on production, even though that production serves the most unimportant of requirements, is to expose some individuals somewhere to loss of employment and income."¹⁰⁴ Zerzan would argue that the root of all complex societies can be found in division of labor and capitalism is just one of the many necessary consequences. Anarchists hold hope that a transformation of cultural values can bring about a civilization that is not oppressive. Bookchin concludes: "We have been obliged to turn to other cultures not only for more humane values, more delicate sensibilities, and richer ecological insights, but also for technical alternatives to our highly mystified "powers of production" — powers that have already begun to overpower us and threaten the integrity of life on the planet."¹⁰⁵ Zerzan, Bird-David and Bookchin all take inspiration from alternative forms of society to imagine how contemporary civilization can be improved. Although all are able to provide clear benefits of adopting smaller and decentralized societies, the difficulty remains in providing a counterweight to the comfort and material fulfillment that complex and artificial civilizations provide. The feasibility of coming up with an alternative society that can 'compete' with civilization will be discussed in more detail in chapter three through the work of Jacques Ellul.

Anarchists, like Bookchin and Chaz Bufe, highlight anarcho-primitivists' tendency towards mystifying technology into one malignant entity. In *Listen Anarchist!* Bufe argues, for example, that if anarcho-primitivists "admit that *any* aspect of technology is beneficial, their blanket critique would fall apart. It'd be extremely difficult, for example, to make a case that we'd be better off without antibiotics and carpentry, and that we'd be better off if smallpox were still rampant."¹⁰⁶ Additionally Bookchin argues that widespread devastation of the environment happened before the advent of industrial society, such as during the colonization of Northern America.¹⁰⁷ An even earlier example may be found with the first human settlers of Iceland. At this time, around 1150 years ago, between 25 and 40% of Iceland was covered in

¹⁰² Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, 33.

¹⁰³ Bird-David, "The Original Affluent Society", 34.

¹⁰⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Mariner Books, 90, 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Cheshire Books, 62, 1982.

¹⁰⁶ Chaz Bufe, *Listen, Anarchist!*, The Anarchist Library, 1998, Accessed via:

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/chaz-bufe-listen-anarchist>.

¹⁰⁷ Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, 33.

woodland, this was reduced to roughly 1% around 1950.¹⁰⁸ These examples do not deal with the fact that modern technology is able to cause destruction on a much greater scale. Bookchin's example is furthermore interesting, because with it he seems to want to shift the blame from technology towards the capitalist culture of the colonizers. Zerzan might have countered by stating that this capitalist culture was a result of an increasingly symbolic culture in Europe at the time, whereas the native inhabitants of Northern America, living in relatively small and simple societies were unable to do excessive harm to their own environment. I would argue that some of these native inhabitants were advancing towards similarly complex and alienated societies as agriculture did exist but had developed later than in Eurasia.¹⁰⁹ Zerzan argues that the cause of man's ability can be found in something older than capitalism, namely symbolic culture. He states that if one follows any societal critique down to its root cause, one will find symbolic culture at its root.¹¹⁰ I argue that Zerzan does not go down far enough, as he is unwilling to identify any reason for alienated societies to arise because of something innate to human nature.

Chaz Bufe also criticizes the anarcho-primitivist notion that a growing population is not sustainable and one of the key causes of environmental destruction. He counters this by pointing out that enough grain is produced to supply every person with more than 1.5 times the average recommended caloric intake.¹¹¹ This calculation does not include the fact that a large portion of this supply of grain is used to feed livestock and produce biofuels.¹¹² The Food and Agriculture organization of the United Nations states that already in 2009 enough food was being produced to feed the expected population peak of 10 billion people,¹¹³ and this might be done organically and whilst maintaining a diverse and resilient ecosystem,¹¹⁴ yet hunger and famine still exists.¹¹⁵ It becomes apparent that hunger is not so much a problem of scarcity but one of poverty and inequality, kept alive by the aforementioned coupling of production and economic security.

Although it remains difficult to attribute individual climate events to human influence, it is well understood that humans have attributed to the warming of the global climate, and that this climate change "has led to discernible and quantifiable changes in the intensity and/or frequency of some types of [extreme weather]."¹¹⁶ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations warns for the added pressure that these increased weather extremes and population growth pose for populations vulnerable to famine,¹¹⁷ but it remains that conflict and abuse of political power are seen as the most significant risk drivers by far.¹¹⁸ Our World in Data points out that a decrease in warfare and increased democratization in recent decades have resulted in a sharp decrease in famine mortality. They theorize, following Amartya Sen's reasoning in *Development as Freedom*, that famines are virtually non-existent in countries with functioning multiparty democratic governments as they are incentivized by elections to respond to food crises and the existence of a free press guarantees accountability when a government does not respond adequately. Chaz Bufe concludes: "A large population magnifies the damage rooted in the profit motive, but population size

¹⁰⁸ *History of forests in Iceland*, Skógræktin: Icelandic Forest Service, Accessed via: <https://www.skogur.is/en/forestry/forestry-in-a-treeless-land/history-of-forests-in-iceland>.

¹⁰⁹ Bruce D. Smith & Richard A. Yarnell, *Initial formation of an indigenous crop complex in eastern North America at 3800 BP*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 106(16), 6561-6566, 2009.

¹¹⁰ Nielsen, *Praxis 25*.

¹¹¹ Bufe, *Listen, Anarchist!*.

¹¹² Eric Holt-Giménez, et al., *We Already Grow Enough Food for 10 Billion People ... and Still Can't End Hunger*, Journal of Sustainable Agriculture 36(6), 595, 2012.

¹¹³ *The State of Food and Agriculture*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2009, Accessed via: <https://www.fao.org/3/i0680e/i0680e.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Holt-Giménez, et al., *We Already Grow Enough Food*, 595.

¹¹⁵ Joe Hasell & Max Roser, *Famines*, Our World in Data, 2017, Accessed via: <https://ourworldindata.org/famines>.

¹¹⁶ *Attribution of Extreme Weather Events in the Context of Climate Change*, The National Academies Press, 19, 2016.

¹¹⁷ *Call for Action to Avert Famine in 2021*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Hasell & Roser, *Famines*.

itself is *not* "at the root of every environmental problem we face."¹¹⁹ I would argue that the anarchists' description of famine and food supply could be adapted to fit an anarcho-primitivism angle just as easily. The only difference is that the two groups would disagree on what is at the root of every environmental problem. For Zerzan, it does not matter if population growth fuels environmental problems and famines or not, as he sees all three as negative consequences of symbolic culture. To the credit of modern society, in a global market economy, failed harvests due to climate anomalies are theoretically far easier to supplement with the production of another region not affected by this climate anomaly, compared to a world dotted with small anarchist or anarcho-primitivism communities. This, of course, in no way makes up for the downsides of capitalism hitherto mentioned.

Another criticism against anarcho-primitivists, and one that is widely shared amongst anarchists, is the level of coercion and violence needed to achieve their desired type of society. Bufe does not reject violence altogether,¹²⁰ but accuses anarcho-primitivists of not acknowledging the loss of life that will result from radically dismantling the current society to be more like that of the hunter-gatherers. Bufe, Andrew Flood and Brian Sheppard all note that a significant number of anarcho-primitivists "run away" from these preventable deaths by claiming that populations will be drastically reduced regardless of whether humans intend it to be so, claiming that phenomena such as the HIV epidemic and famines are necessary consequences of civilizations' inharmonious relationship with nature, and are a way of returning to a more stable equilibrium.¹²¹¹²²¹²³ Although the origins of HIV have been linked to densely populated cities with a large number of prostitutes that arose in colonial Western Africa in the early 20th century¹²⁴, and the use of unsterile needles in Africa in the 1950s,¹²⁵ suggesting aspects of industrial society have created the conditions necessary for simian immunodeficiency viruses (SIVs) to mutate into HIV, it remains rather speculative to suggest that such diseases will inevitably decimate human populations. The story of the origins of HIV and more recently COVID-19 does, however, highlight that the interconnected and densely populated nature of contemporary societies allow for the rapid spread and mutation of diseases, resulting in millions of deaths.¹²⁶¹²⁷ Although one can reasonably agree with Flood and other anarchists that the level of coercion that is needed to achieve anarcho-primitivists' plans is problematic, the same can be said about the plans of the anarchists that aim this critique at the primitivists. Anarchism in all its varieties remains very much a fringe movement and to suggest that no coercion is needed to achieve an anarchist society is somewhat hypocritical.

Although Zerzan excused Kaczynski violence as necessary to bring a suppressed viewpoint to light, he concedes that if all these institutions were to vanish immediately it would probably result in millions of

¹¹⁹ Bufe, *Listen, Anarchist!*.

¹²⁰ Bufe, *Listen, Anarchist!*.

¹²¹ Bufe, *Listen, Anarchist!*.

¹²² Andrew Flood, *Civilisation, Primitivism and anarchism*, Anarkismo.net, 2004, Accessed via: https://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=1451.

¹²³ Brian Oliver Sheppard, *Anarchism vs Primitivism*, See Sharp Press, 2003, Accessed via: <https://libcom.org/article/anarchism-vs-primitivism-brian-oliver-sheppard>.

¹²⁴ João Dinis De Sousa, et al., *High GUD Incidence in the early 20th century created a particularly permissive time window for the origin and initial spread of epidemic HIV strains*, PloS one 5(4), e9936, 2010.

¹²⁵ Preston A. Marx, et al., *Serial human passage of simian immunodeficiency virus by unsterile injections and the emergence of epidemic human immunodeficiency virus in Africa*, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B Biological Sciences 356(1410), 911-920, 2001.

¹²⁶ *Fact Sheet - World AIDS Day 2021*, UNAIDS, 2021, Accessed via:

https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_FactSheet_en.pdf.

¹²⁷ *WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*, World Health Organization, Accessed via: <https://covid19.who.int/>.

deaths and this not be good.¹²⁸ In recent years he has admitted that he himself does not know how one would go about breaking down the current system, but mainly urges us to think about the assumptions we take for granted in our current society.¹²⁹¹³⁰ He, furthermore, urges people to learn the skills needed to live without civilization, such as making stone tools and identifying edible plants: “I mean, how anxious will you be to pull down civilization if you don’t know how to live without it? So, we have to start getting those skills.”¹³¹ John Moore adds that anarcho-primitivism does not seek to gain power as a movement, but merely wants individuals to live in free communities. A good first step, therefore, would be to create communities of resistances to start living in this way.¹³² I would argue that the anarcho-primitivist argument is at its strongest when its critique is not forced to the mainstream through coercive means, as this would only make it easier to be dismissed without engaging with its valid critique of civilization. The question remains whether non-coercive and gradual anarcho-primitivism in the form of Moore’s free communities can coexist with all encompassing civilization. This will be discussed in more depth in chapter three with the ideas of Jacques Ellul.

Zerzan seems thus to align more with seeing Anarcho-primitivism as mere critique on society.¹³³ In the introduction to Zerzan’s *Future Primitive Revisited*, Michael Becker notes that by doing so, Zerzan is engaging in the civilized practice of critical theory, and as a result, also runs the risks of falling into the same pitfalls as the critical theorists before him. Namely, that “it tends toward the discovery of absolute truths, which, once attained, close off discussion, critique and questioning. That is to say, it closes off freedom.”¹³⁴ In doing so, one might end up in a situation where everything civilized is awful, and everything primitive is great. This seems to be the core of the criticism leveled at anarcho-primitivists like Zerzan. In disregarding any good that might have come from civilization and ignoring any pain and suffering primitive peoples could have experienced, a complex and diverse mosaic of human experiences spanning across millions of years is reduced to a binary opposition. An example of this is Zerzan’s criticism of transhumanist thinkers for promoting an increasingly mediated way of communication, potentially leading to some sort of singularity or hivemind. At the same time, however, he entertains the idea that pre-symbolic cultures might have communicated through the use of telepathy without the need for symbols, which he calls the original singularity.¹³⁵ Inferring that we can choose to exist either as one in primitive and telepathic bliss or in transhumanist and alienated agony. Becker advises it is best for the anarcho-primitivists to not merely reverse the traditional false dialectic where primitive is bad and civilization is good, as by doing so “the primitive will necessarily derive its meaning from the negation of civilization.”¹³⁶ Bookchin puts his similar criticism more firmly and fiercely:

“Significantly different epochs, hominid and/or human species, and ecological and technological situations are all swept up together into shared life “within the bounds of nature.” Zerzan’s

¹²⁸ Lawrence Jarach & John Zerzan, *A Dialog on Primitivism: Lawrence Jarach interviews John Zerzan*, The Anarchist Library, 2009, Accessed via: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/various-authors-a-dialog-on-primitivism>.

¹²⁹ Nielsen, *Praxis* 25.

¹³⁰ Kenneth B. Noble, *Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber* [Newspaper article May 7, 1995], New York Times, 1995.

¹³¹ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist*.

¹³² Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*.

¹³³ Ishkah, *A Conversation with John Zerzan on Direct Action, School Shootings, Authenticity, Veganism & More*, The Anarchist Library, 2021, Accessed via:

<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ishkah-a-conversation-with-john-zerzan-on-direct-action-school-shootings-authenticity-veganism>.

¹³⁴ Michael Becker, *Introduction*, in Zerzan, John. *Future Primitive Revisited*, Feral House, 24, 2012.

¹³⁵ Roc Mortin, *The Anarcho-Primitivist*.

¹³⁶ Michael Becker, *Introduction*, 26.

*simplification of the highly complex dialectic between humans and nonhuman nature reveals a mentality so reductionist and simplistic that one is obliged to stand before it in awe.”*¹³⁷

In concluding this chapter, one can reasonably argue that Zerzan’s image of primitive hunter-gatherer societies and their affluence are romanticized. It, furthermore, seems that the move from band societies to large complex civilizations was more gradual than Zerzan would have us believe. With evidence of complex stratified societies existing at least 300,000 years ago, civilization does not seem to be the result of a sudden wrong turn in history. This complicates the binary opposition between nature and civilization that Zerzan puts forth. Since the dawn of man, nature and civilization have been entangled, with civilization being both the product of and a driving force behind human evolution. Just as the human shapes civilization, civilization shapes the human, like a clockmaker being bound by her own creation. This also highlights the strength of Zerzan’s analysis. Through critique of the whole of civilization the contingency of societal phenomena and their role in determining how we live come to light. Some of these phenomena being: Division of labor, hierarchical structures, the idea of progress and scarcity and their devastating impact on ecosystems, the coupling of production and economic security in capitalist societies, and the lack of autonomy and accountability in complex impersonal societies. The next chapter will seek to deepen the anarcho-primitivist critique of civilization by focusing on the phenomenon of modern technology and the impact of living in complex societies on the individual. This will be done through discussing the two main inspirations of Theodore Kaczynski: Desmond Morris and Jacques Ellul. In addition, the contrasting ideas of Ellul and Kaczynski on revolution and violence will be discussed, in the hopes of creating some idea on why the latter resorted to terrorism.

3. Rage against the machine: Theodore Kaczynski on the anti-tech revolution

In a bombing campaign spanning nearly two decades, Theodore Kaczynski sought to do harm to those involved in maintaining or advancing the state of modern technology, killing three people and injured 23 others in the process.¹³⁸ The motivation and ideas behind his acts are detailed in three main works. The first of which, *Industrial Society and its Future* (ISAIF) was first published in The New York Times and The Washington Post on the 19th of September 1995, after Kaczynski threatened that the bombings would continue if his manifesto would not be printed by a major news outlet.¹³⁹ This work begins by highlighting the negative consequences of living in a modern technological society for the individual, after which it puts forth the consequences of such a society on a larger scale and how one could go about dismantling it. This manifesto was published different times later on. The most accurate and consistent, according to Kaczynski himself, can be found in his second main work entitled *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. “The Unabomber”*.¹⁴⁰ It notably contains Kaczynski’s critique on anarcho-primitivism.¹⁴¹ In this critique he addresses the flawed anthropological underpinnings of anarcho-primitivism. In similar lines to Bird-David, he states that the analyses of contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes, most notably the one by Sahlins, are affected by poor statistical power, arbitrary

¹³⁷ Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, 41.

¹³⁸ David Johnston, *Judge Sentences Confessed Bomber to Four Life Terms*, The New York Times, 5th of May 1998.

¹³⁹ Howard Kurtz, *Unabomber Manuscript is Published*, The Washington Post, 19th of September 1995.

¹⁴⁰ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*.

distinctions between work and leisure and the influence of modern industrial technology. He goes one step further than Bird-David, however, stating that anthropologists and other thinkers, like Zerzan, leave out evidence contrary to their beliefs to create a “politically correct Garden of Eden” in which there is total gender equality, sexual freedom, and no violence or hard work.¹⁴² Kaczynski calls this a dangerous distraction, as by escaping in these politically correct fantasies, one does not need to address what he deems to be the true instigators of our contemporary woes, the techno-industrial systems. At least in the case of Zerzan, this criticism of anarcho-primitivism can be refuted. Although it has been established previously that Zerzan’s work is somewhat romanticized, this does not take away from his clear and fundamental view of civilization as the root of contemporary woes. Kaczynski, furthermore, admits to being unsure of the origins of the impulse to create the image of a “pure and innocent world existing at the dawn of time”.¹⁴³ Again in the case of Zeran, it is clear that it serves as a way to question the superiority of civilization at every level and might be further understood through Plessner’s law of the utopian standpoint which will be discussed in chapter four.

Kaczynski’s third and most recent major work is *Anti-Tech Revolution: Why and How*. He states that this work “represents the more-or-less final result of a lifetime of thought and reading...”¹⁴⁴ In the first two chapters of this book, he explains why modern technology cannot be controlled and how it threatens human existence. In the final two chapters, Kaczynski defines certain rules and considerations an anti-technological revolution should adhere to. A question arises, why would Kaczynski incite an anti-tech revolution if he is of the opinion that primitive life was a lot more difficult and dangerous than the anarcho-primitivists like Zerzan imagine? It has to do with a notion that is central to his mostly coherent corpus. He states that the modern technological systems are interwoven into today’s society in a way that corrupts and hinders the biological need of what he calls the power process. He does not want to return to a primitive society by destroying technology as a whole, he is rather against modern technology that creates monotonous and purposeless lives by disturbing the need for what he calls the power process. In order to understand what this process exactly entails, the main inspiration for this idea will first be examined. In analyzing Kaczynski’s personal annotated version of ISAIF, Sean Fleming found that the power process was largely inspired by Desmond Morris’ idea of the stimulus struggle.¹⁴⁵

3.1 The Human Zoo: Desmond Morris on the super-tribal lifestyle

In the first chapter of his 1969 book *The Human Zoo*, Desmond Morris states that human societies have moved from tribal living to super-tribal living, the latter being characterized by densely populated urban environments. He states that the main distinction between these two is that in the latter, one does not know each member of his community personally.¹⁴⁶ Morris states that this impersonal nature of society has had a great toll on modern man. He goes on to argue that the enormous material benefits that come from living in a super-tribe come at the cost of having to discipline the vast population in order to make society run smoothly. It, moreover, requires an incredible amount of resources that cannot be acquired sustainably.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 157.

¹⁴³ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 162.

¹⁴⁴ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ Sean Fleming, *The Unabomber and the origins of anti-tech radicalism*, Journal of Political Ideologies 27(2), 207-225, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Desmond Morris, *The Human Zoo*, Kodansha International, 18, 1996.

¹⁴⁷ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 19.

Kaczynski echoes this sentiment, lamenting how the interconnectedness of modern society has meant that individual behavior has to be regulated in great detail.¹⁴⁸ Morris argues that whereas before people gained an adequate amount of stimulation from their environment through their struggle to survive, those living in super-tribes will have to get the same stimulation from their artificial environment. A process which he calls the stimulus struggle:

*"The object of the struggle is to obtain the optimum amount of stimulation from the environment. This does not mean the maximum amount. ... At some point between [over- and under-stimulation] there is the ideal level, and it is obtaining this level in relation to our whole existence that is the goal of the Stimulus Struggle."*¹⁴⁹

Morris likens the super-tribal lifestyle to that of zoo animals. As a zoologist he experienced caged animals making similarly frustrated attempts to gain stimulation from their environment compared to the people dwelling in urban communities. He is, furthermore, of the opinion that receiving the adequate amount of stimulation is vastly more difficult for opportunistic animals, like dogs, raccoons, monkeys, apes and humans. Whereas specialist animals, like eagles and koalas, "have evolved one supreme survival device on which they depend for their very existence, and which dominates their life",¹⁵⁰ opportunistic animals live to exploit even the smallest advantage their environment can give them, making them abhor inactivity. Morris states that humans are the most opportunistic and therefore live with a built-in demand for high stimulus input, that makes them bored or even neurotic when placed in an artificial environment where their dietary needs are met.

Morris structures the way the stimulus struggle manifests behavior in animal and human zoos using six principles. For this thesis the first and third principles are the most important.

The first principle describes how, if stimulation is weak, one increases their behavioral output by creating unnecessary problems to solve. A caged feline, for example, might hunt the food it is given, even if it is dead. In human life this usually takes the form of what Morris calls substitute activities, meant to substitute survival activities, like furniture rearranging or collecting stamps. Some can move away from these activities to tempting survival, where an individual might purposefully plunge one's life into chaos, by for example starting an affair, which forces them into a "true survival struggle of fighting for [their] social life."¹⁵¹ Less damaging varieties of tempting survival by proxy, see one creating social chaos in other people's life or identifying oneself with fictional characters in books, film, etc. The third principle sees one react to weak stimulation by inventing novel activities. Here, a redeeming quality of super-tribal living can be found. In caged animals, especially primates, this creativity principle might manifest in finding new ways of locomotion, like rolling, or food begging. But in humans, these novel activities might take the shape of fine arts, science and philosophy. According to Morris, these activities are preferable to struggling for survival as they are beneficial to society, effectively combat under stimulation and also allows one to make maximum use of one's faculties.

Although Kaczynski's power process takes its biological foundation from Morris' stimulus struggle, it is more psychological in its description, only referring to cases of human thought and behavior. According to Kaczynski, the power process consists of four crucial parts. These being goal, effort, attainment of goal and autonomy. He explains the significance of having goals by using the example of a leisured aristocrat.¹⁵² The

¹⁴⁸ Kaczynski, *The Truth about Primitive Life*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 182.

¹⁵⁰ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 184.

¹⁵¹ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 189.

¹⁵² Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 47.

aristocrat has an abundance of power at his disposal but no way to exercise it, which will leave him acutely bored or depressed. Kaczynski states that having power is not enough, one must have goals towards which one's power can be exercised. When one looks at the leisured aristocrat, we see that his physical necessities were taken care of before he was even born. Because he does not have to exert any effort in the pursuit of survival, it will not give him any fulfillment. Kaczynski further states that if one is not able to attain his goal of acquiring physical necessities this will result in death, but the non-attainment of other goals results in frustration, which leads to low self-esteem. From this he concludes that almost all people need goals that require serious effort to attain and a reasonable rate of success in attaining these goals, if one is to avoid serious psychological problems.¹⁵³¹⁵⁴ He goes on to state that most people, but not all,¹⁵⁵ need some sense of autonomy in the power process. This does not mean an individual has to work alone, but that when they work in a small group, he has to be at least able to assert some control.¹⁵⁶

Kaczynski argues that autonomy is harder to come by when working in the humongous and interconnected systems of modern industrial society. In a similar vein, Zerzan states that the move away from smaller band societies, meant a great loss of autonomy and accountability for the individual. As stated, Morris argues that many laws have to be imposed on the individual in modern industrial society, to keep all the systems running smoothly. He goes on to say, however, that the advantage of super-tribal living is to choose one's own substitute activities: "In primitive tribal life there was no choice. You had to do this, and this, and this, or die. Now you can do this, or that, or the other - anything you like, so long as you realize you have to do something, or break the rules of the Stimulus Struggle."¹⁵⁷ Discussing philosophy, science and the arts, he goes on to state: "... When the human brain can devise such beautiful pursuits as these, we must count ourselves fortunate to be amongst the stimulus strugglers, rather than the strugglers for survival. This is man the inventor playing for all he is worth "¹⁵⁸ Kaczynski agrees that in present times one has way more autonomy in substitute activities,¹⁵⁹¹⁶⁰ but certainly would not call stimulus strugglers fortunate. He states that we are hindered in our freedom to pursue physical necessities in a satisfying way. Using the example of making a shelter, he notes that one is forced to adhere to certain regulations regarding where and how the building will be constructed. Although one can put the same amount of energy and emotional involvement in substitute activities as one does in requiring physical necessities, they can never be as fulfilling, as the artificial goals tied to these activities are never-ending. Another downside to substitute activities in Kaczynski's framework, as noted by Fleming, is that some of them, like scientific research, advance the technological system that impedes the power process.¹⁶¹ This creates a vicious cycle where the more people do scientific research, the more the technological system develops, the more need arises for surrogate activities such as scientific research.

Kaczynski and Morris seem to focus on the different extremes of what substitute activities entail. In most cases, these are activities are probably neither extremely beneficial nor detrimental for the advancement of a person's mood or the course of humankind. Morris mentions examples of these mundane activities, such

¹⁵³ Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 47.

¹⁵⁴ In a footnote to these psychological problems, Kaczynski mentions that some are similar to those shown by caged animals. Moreover, some of them, like abnormal sexual and eating behavior, are also covered in Morris' stimulus struggle, making the connection between the two authors more explicit.

¹⁵⁵ Those with a low drive for power, or those that are able to identify themselves with a powerful organization or mass movement have little to no need for autonomy, according to Kaczynski.

¹⁵⁶ Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 188.

¹⁵⁸ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 195.

¹⁵⁹ Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 49.

¹⁶⁰ Kaczynski uses the term surrogate activities instead of survival-substitute activities. Sean Fleming argues that he might have changed Morris' terminology to avoid giving any leads to the FBI.

¹⁶¹ Fleming, *The Unabomber*.

as furniture arranging, but puts greater emphasis on the creative potential of substitute activities, even though many an individual might feel they lack the time, interest, or talent to fully engage in such things. He is, furthermore, quick to justify the potential negative effects of surrogate activities that he covers extensively by arguing that complex societies set the conditions for humans to develop even more advanced cognitive abilities,¹⁶² and that what we experience are evolutionary growth pains, as we have been partaking in surrogate activities since only relatively recently.¹⁶³ Kaczynski, on the other hand, is hell-bent on the purposelessness of substitute activities, even though one might argue that committing oneself to expressing their ideas by making art through which one can positively affect others is more purposeful than working each day to sustain one's life. As in what one finds purpose is ultimately subjective. Morris seems to have the hope that humans can and have to some extent adapted to a life with surrogate activities, whereas Kaczynski can never do so successfully.

One might argue that Kaczynski's sentiment manifests itself more thoroughly in this digital age than in Morris' time with the help of his aforementioned concept of tempting survival by proxy. Morris writes about identifying oneself with fictional characters in books. In this day and age, advancements in digital media made it so that one can tempt survival through fictional characters with an abundance of films, shows, YouTube videos and video games. Moreover, one is now able to live through one's own social media presence and that of (mostly) nonfictional characters, such as the Kardashians. Kaczynski might seek the cause for this escapism in his idea that outside the realm of substitute activities one feels that things are outside their control: "[the] difference, we argue, is that modern man has the sense (largely justified) that change is IMPOSED on him."¹⁶⁴ Here lies the strength of Kaczynski's argument. It is a similar feeling that one gets when seeing an overweight polar bear drag herself from one part of an enclosure filled with fake icebergs to the other. Even Though this polar bear, and the human in the city, has her material needs met, she is denied an opportunity to live in a way that, albeit more precarious, hones her physical and mental faculties for the purpose of survival. That this is a more purposeful existence for the caged animal is hard to deny, but when applied to the human sphere this judgment is more difficult to make. Can one justify the loss of autonomy with a minority's ability to engage in art, science and philosophy? Is it perhaps worthwhile because the majority can enjoy the fruits of these human endeavors? One cannot help but wonder if an alternative society could exist where an individual autonomy and connection with nature is safeguarded to some degree, whilst allowing art, science and philosophy to flourish.

In the hopes of reclaiming his need for the power process and committing himself to survival, Kaczynski resigned from his position as an assistant professor in mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley and moved to Lincoln, Montana to live in an austere and remote cabin. He stated that he had been fascinated with escaping from civilization and living somewhere wild and untamed since he was a child.¹⁶⁵ He states that living in the wild satisfied the need for freedom and personal autonomy.¹⁶⁶ Kaczynski describes other unexpected satisfactions: "In city life you tend to be turned inward, in a way. Your environment is crowded with irrelevant sights and sounds, and you get conditioned to block most of them out of your consciousness. In the woods you get so that your awareness is turned outward, toward your environment, hence you are much more conscious of what goes on around you."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 17.

¹⁶³ Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 183.

¹⁶⁴ Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 53.

¹⁶⁵ Theodore John Kaczynski, *An Interview with Ted*, in Kaczynski, Theodore John, Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. "The Unabomber", Feral House, 394, 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Kaczynski, *An Interview*, 395 & 405.

¹⁶⁷ Kaczynski, *An Interview*, 405.

An interesting consequence of his outward orientation are behaviors that parallel Bird-David's idea of the cosmic nature of sharing that she observed in contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes. Kaczynski describes how every time he successfully hunted a snowshoe rabbit, he would thank the tutelary spirit of all snowshoe rabbits, which he called Grandfather Rabbit.¹⁶⁸¹⁶⁹ After a while of doing this, he would feel the need to draw rabbits, and even carved one from wood, in a similar vein to artists of prehistoric times who lavished cave walls with elaborate wildlife scenes. He, furthermore, describes how he would get to the hills in the morning and feel drawn to go on and on, because of what he called will o'the wisp or wings of the morning.¹⁷⁰¹⁷¹ Similar to Bird-David's tribes, Kaczynski gains an intimate connection with nature through what is shared with him by nature, such as sustenance and energy. It is interesting to see in this example how once cultural perception can be influenced by one's ecological circumstances, illustrating Zerzan's idea of how division of labor and agriculture might have contributed to a symbolic culture with a mechanistic view of nature.

Even though it seemed he was able to live the self-sustaining life he wanted in Montana to the most extent, he was getting increasingly frustrated with the encroaching of civilization. The final straw came when he found a road had been built straight through one of his favorite pieces of nature. From that point on, he was filled with a different resolve: "You just can't imagine how upset I was. It was from that point on I decided that, rather than trying to acquire further wilderness skills, I would work on getting back at the system. Revenge."¹⁷² His reluctance to relocate to an even more remote location to try again to live the way he wanted might be explained by Kaczynski's conviction that there is no end to the encroaching nature of the interconnected and interwoven technological systems. Sean Fleming notes that central to this way of thinking is Jacques Ellul's idea of modern technology constituting an indivisible, self-perpetuating system.¹⁷³ Using Kaczynski's annotated photocopy of Ellul's *The Technological Society*, Fleming argues that Kaczynski uses Morris's ideas as evolutionary underpinnings for Ellulian sociological arguments in *ISAIF*. In his latest work, *Anti-Tech Revolution*, Ellul's impact is also felt. Kaczynski notes that the technological system is a whole that cannot be divided up,¹⁷⁴ and is a universal phenomenon that does not leave any part of the world untouched.¹⁷⁵ Again, he drenches these ideas in a Darwinian sauce, describing a world where self-propagating systems compete for resources and those most powerful are those that use technology most efficiently. In the next section, it will become clear to what extent Kaczynski takes after Ellul when a closer look will be taken at the latter's conception of the phenomenon of modern technique.

¹⁶⁸ Kaczynski, *An Interview*, 400.

¹⁶⁹ Theresa Kintz, *Interview with Ted Kaczynski*, The Anarchist Library, 2014, Accessed via: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/theresa-kintz-interview-with-ted-kaczynski>.

¹⁷⁰ Kintz, *Interview with Ted Kaczynski*.

¹⁷¹ It might be necessary to mention here that both Grandfather Rabbit and will o'the wisp are manifestations of cultural archetypes that Kaczynski most likely would have read about before experiencing them in nature. I do not think this invalidates this example, however, as it seems not much different from a child in a hunter-gatherer community being taught by the light of a bonfire what spirits dwell in the forest, only to experience them later firsthand, albeit informed by existing cultural ideas.

¹⁷² Kintz, *Interview with Ted Kaczynski*.

¹⁷³ Fleming, *The Unabomber*.

¹⁷⁴ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 49.

¹⁷⁵ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 67.

3.2 The stake of the century: Jacques Ellul on technique

Jacques Ellul's aforementioned seminal work *The Technological Society* was published as an English translation in 1964. Ten years earlier, the original French work was published under the title *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*.¹⁷⁶ The French title conveys the urgency of the phenomenon of technique that Ellul wants to address in this dense tome. In the foreword to the revised American edition, he likens himself to a physician in an epidemic, diagnosing the technological phenomenon with objective scrutiny, whilst at the same time being under the influence of it: "In such situations the mind may remain cold and lucid and the method objective, but there is inevitably a profound tension of the whole being."¹⁷⁷ His primary purpose is not to offer a solution, as he is unsure how to solve it, he instead aims at bringing awareness to technological necessity: "It is a call to the sleeper to awake."¹⁷⁸

3.2.1 Definitions, critique and origins

Ellul defines technique in our technological society as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."¹⁷⁹ He makes it clear that technique is a sociological phenomenon and cannot be interchanged with particular material manifestations of this phenomenon to reach a certain end, such as the machine. Man can assert oneself independently of the external object that is a machine, "but when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. It is no longer face to face with man but is integrated with him, and it progressively absorbs him."¹⁸⁰ Ellul attributes seven characteristics that elucidate the deep-rootedness of modern technique, which has "no common measure with [the technique] of the past".¹⁸¹

The first is rationality. It concerns a rational process which standardizes and systemizes all that is spontaneous or irrational to make things more efficient. The second is artificiality. He argues that all the means man possess through technique are artificial means. Ellul states that technique is opposed to nature: "It destroys, eliminates, or subordinates the natural world, and does not allow this world to restore itself or even to enter into a symbiotic relation with it."¹⁸² The third is automatism. As technique operates in the sphere of the rational, "it follows that there is a best, most efficient answer, making technical movement self-directing."¹⁸³ The fourth is self-augmentation. This relates to technical advances rapidly growing and building on another, also making the number of technicians growing along with it. As it grows in size and complexity, the role of the individual technician and scientist becomes almost negligible.¹⁸⁴ The fifth is monism. Ellul observes that all individual techniques share a common essence, meaning the technological phenomenon forms a whole that cannot be separated into good and bad techniques. If a combination of preceding elements make a new technology possible, albeit sustainable energy or the atomic bomb, it will

¹⁷⁶ Helena Mateus Jerónimo, et al., *Introduction: Ellul Returns*, in Jerónimo, Helena Mateus, et al., Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century, *Philosophy of Engineering and Technology* 13, 2-3, 2013.

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Author's Foreword to the Revised American Edition*, in Ellul, Jacques, *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, 1, 1967.

¹⁷⁸ Ellul, *Author's Foreword*, 1.

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Note to the Reader*, in Ellul, Jacques, *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, 1, 1967.

¹⁸⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, 6, 1967.

¹⁸¹ Ellul, *Note*, 1.

¹⁸² Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 79.

¹⁸³ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 80.

¹⁸⁴ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 86.

be so.¹⁸⁵ The sixth is universalism. This refers to the way in which technique is becoming omnipresent both geographically, but also qualitatively, meaning in all aspects of a civilization. The seventh and final characteristic is autonomy. The phenomenon of technique has become so widespread and integrated in every part of life, that it can now be considered a closed system. It is no longer influenced by external necessities, and has therefore become self-sufficient. Ellul states: “[Man] resembles a slug inserted into a slot machine: he starts the operation without participating in it.”¹⁸⁶ The internal logic which propels technique makes it want to replace or modify any natural obstacle it encounters in the name of efficiency. The conclusion is as follows: “If we make use of technique, we must accept the specificity and autonomy of its ends, and the totality of its rules. Our own desires and aspirations can change nothing.”¹⁸⁷ This determinism in daily life is key to Zerzan and Kaczynski’s philosophy as well; they differ with Ellul, however, in their conception on why techniques were readily adopted.

The origins of the sociological phenomenon of technique remains an enigma for Ellul. He states that “technical activity is the most primitive activity of man”,¹⁸⁸ and hypothesis that at the core of it lies the phenomenon of invention. In elaborating on the rise of technique, Ellul shows ideas parallel to those of Nurit Bird-David. Ellul argues that for primitive man work hardly existed as it was intertwined with leisure:” In the achievement of a small economic goal, for example, the technical effort became secondary to the pleasure of gathering together.” He also states that primitive man was content with restricted consumption of goods, as it meant they had to work less, a phenomenon that Bird-David ascribes to cultural processes. Ellul goes on to state that contemporary worship of technique derives from primitive man’s worship of their inventions. This point shows a parallel to an aforementioned idea of Ronald Wright. Who states that the switch to agriculture and the hunting of megafauna were most likely celebrated as they greatly increased man’s ability to meet their material needs. This aspect, which shows how something can be destructive and alienating on a societal level but bring many advantages and fulfillment for the individual in the short term, is greatly underplayed by Zerzan and Kaczynski. They both find technique’s success in its tendency to dominate and although Ellul certainly does not venerate technique leaves no room for alternatives, he gives a more complete image of its rise by pointing to the aspects that are celebrated. He does take this sentiment far, being convinced that most people celebrate or even worship technology. He states, for example: “Modern men are so enthusiastic about technique, so assured of its superiority, so immersed in the technical milieu, that without exception they are oriented toward technical progress.”¹⁸⁹ Although it might be so that the majority of people do venerate technology or at least do not question it, there is a significant amount of people who do question it, exemplified by fringe movements such as anarcho-primitivism. It is, however, clear to see that even the most ardent opponents of modern technology have trouble escaping it all together, such as Zerzan making use of the television and email and Kaczynski turning to bomb-making.

One of the most debated aspects of Ellul’s technique is its supposed determinism. For example, in 1962 Ellul contributed to a conference on *Ideas of Technology*. Most of the discussion at the end of the conference was concerned with whether Ellul was right in describing technology as a closed circle.¹⁹⁰ The aforementioned Murray Bookchin also questions the deterministic picture that Ellul paints, although providing no argument to the contrary.¹⁹¹ Addressing this criticism, Ellul states that he does not deny the

¹⁸⁵ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 97.

¹⁸⁶ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 135.

¹⁸⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 141.

¹⁸⁸ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 23.

¹⁸⁹ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 85.

¹⁹⁰ Warren E. Preece, *A Report of the Discussion*, Technology and Culture 3(4), 466-485, 1962.

¹⁹¹ Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, 30.

individual's inner sphere of freedom. But he maintains that an individual's present ideas and actions do not "exert any influence on social, political, or economic mechanisms."¹⁹² He also noted that the powerlessness of the individual is not unique to the phenomenon of modern technique, stating:

*"I do not maintain that the individual is more determined today than he has been in the past; rather, that he is differently determined. Primitive man, hemmed in by prohibitions, taboos, and rites, was, of course, socially determined. But it is an illusion -unfortunately very widespread- to think that because we have broken through the prohibitions, taboos, and rites that bound primitive man, we have become free. We are conditioned by something new: technological civilization. I make no reference to a past period of history in which men were allegedly free, happy, and independent."*¹⁹³

In this quote, Ellul shows a small parallel with Zerzan. Who notes, as stated previously, that man lost his individual and immediate connection with nature when symbolic culture made that rituals and rites were used to access the divine by a select few. Opposed to Zerzan, however, Ellul denies a pre-symbolic and non-alienated human existence, being of the opinion that sociological phenomena have determined the lives of individuals since the beginning of civilization. Ellul states that what is unique about the modern technique is its exceedingly wider and deeper penetration into human existence through the characteristics described above. Ellul states it is futile to try and go back to a previous social form as Zerzan suggests: "What is done is done. It is our duty to find our place in our present situation and in no other. Nostalgia has no survival value in the modern world and can only be considered a flight into dreamland."¹⁹⁴ He also notes that globally speaking any past that one wishes to revive seems to be not much of an improvement compared to today's state of things. Zerzan would counter this by pointing to a pre-symbolic state of being and Kaczynski would state that in times before modern technology, our lives were less determined by sociological phenomena and more by ecological phenomena that are easier to accept. These points are difficult to maintain when one acknowledges the importance of (symbolic) culture in shaping the human, as the second chapter of this chapter found. By defining technique as all-pervasive and denying any solution to the problem of technique might exist in past ways of living. Ellul creates very little room for a solution to arise.

Another factor that complicates the analysis of Ellul's ideas is his conscious decision to write in hyperbolic terms. He notes that some of what he writes is an extrapolation of trends he sees in society at the time of writing the work, and that they might not come to pass as written.¹⁹⁵ The outlook Ellul sketches remains rather bleak. Later on he stated that his many theological works provide a counterweight to the rigid technological system he sets up in his sociological works.¹⁹⁶ His sociological works, however, especially the article *The Technological Order* that he provided to the aforementioned conference, hint at some way to combat modern technique that excludes explicit theological mentions. Before this, we shall discuss what Ellul describes as fake and real problems that are caused by the technological system.

¹⁹² Ellul, *Author's Foreword*, 2.

¹⁹³ Ellul, *Author's Foreword*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 403.

¹⁹⁵ Ellul, *Author's Foreword*, 4.

¹⁹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Mirror of These Ten Years*, Christian Century Magazine, 200-204, 1970, Accessed via: <https://www.religion-online.org/article/mirror-of-these-ten-years/>.

3.2.2 The real and fake problems posed by technique

Contrary to Zerzan and Kaczynski, Ellul argues that modern technique will eventually solve most of the material problems that it causes, such as overpopulation, nervous tension and air pollution. He makes no moral judgment on how these problems may be solved, such as excessive medication being used to treat depression, but simply states that from a material point of view, a society with more technique provides better possibilities for human survival than one with less.¹⁹⁷ He states this fact contributes nothing to the solution of the real problems that we will discuss momentarily. This is a striking difference between anarcho-primitivists and Ellul, as the former spent a lot of ink debating in which ways technological society is hurling towards its eventual demise, resulting in the decimation of a large part of the human population. It is interesting to note here how Ellul does not seem to envision a limit to the endless progress and increase in efficiency that modern technique strives for. Isabelle Lamaud notes that Ellul's ideas on the self-augmentation and autonomy of technique provide a view of how environmental protection provides an opportunity to grow further.¹⁹⁸ The environmental problems that technological advances have created create new areas of expansion, as can be seen with the quest for renewable energy, that now create more problems, such as the recycling of lithium-ion batteries, that are left to technology to solve. When seeing such occurrences, one cannot help thinking along similar lines to Ronald Wright, that the technological system will eventually face a material problem that it cannot rationally improvise its way out of, leading to collapse.

The real problem according to Ellul is that although the penetration of technique in all aspects of society means our material and psychological needs are, or will at some point, be completely met, they come at the cost of having to adapt to the technical milieu.¹⁹⁹ This trade-off between the instantaneous gratification of needs and the loss of autonomy is a theme many of the authors above share with Ellul. Desmond Morris and Ellul agree that humans can successfully adapt to their artificial environment, although Morris states this would be through evolution instead of technical means. Kaczynski, Zerzan and Wright seem to think that the present course of society will not only bring a great loss of autonomy but will also lead to ecological and/or societal collapse. Ellul on the other hand, seems solely concerned with the society turning into something akin to a highly complex and technical bee colony, where the individual is reduced to nothing more than a cog in the machine, even mentioning genetic alteration might be used to achieve this.²⁰⁰ Similar dystopian images are common amongst literary authors of the time, such as Aldous Huxley, who also made a contribution to *Ideas of Technology* in 1962. Three decades earlier in his novel *Brave New World* Huxley describes a society where its inhabitants are genetically altered to fit their assigned role and psychological needs can be provided for in an instant through medication.²⁰¹ When the inhabitants of this society are faced with a person being spontaneous, creative or showing strong emotions, they are appalled. This societal sketch echoes Ellul's idea of technical perfection excluding human development in any meaningful sense.²⁰² Huxley himself illustrates this point with the existence of the plastic cup. He considers this foolproof tool to come at the disadvantage of excluding the opportunity of artistic expression and the honing of a craft that came through the production of earlier types of water carriers.²⁰³ The drive of

¹⁹⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 396.

¹⁹⁸ Isabelle Lamaud, *Against Environmental Protection? Ecological Modernization as “Technician Ecology”*, in Jerónimo, Helena Mateus, et al., Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century, *Philosophy of Engineering and Technology* 13, 94, 2013.

¹⁹⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Order*, *Technology and Culture* 3(4), 395, 1962.

²⁰⁰ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 337.

²⁰¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Chatto & Windus, 1932.

²⁰² Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 400-401.

²⁰³ Aldous Huxley, *Commentary*, *Technology and Culture* 3(4), 636, 1962.

efficiency and progress makes one blind to the polychromatic and complex reality of possibility that are contained within a given object, activity, or more specifically in this case, method of production.

Ellul argues that everyone is subject to techniques that adapt us to our technical milieu. Even though one might exploit a particular technique, at the same time one might be exploited by others.²⁰⁴ Ellul gives the example of propaganda as a technique that most are subjected to without realizing it. Another example prevalent in the current age is the phenomenon of nudging. Ellul notes that technique enriches humanity in some sense too, but this too came at a cost:

“The machine's senses and organs have multiplied the powers of human senses and organs, enabling man to penetrate a new milieu and revealing to him unknown sights, liberties, and servitudes. He has been liberated little by little from physical constraints, but he is all the more the slave of abstract ones. He acts through intermediaries and consequently has lost contact with reality.”²⁰⁵

Ellul's description of the problem of technique, being chiefly concerned with the decrease in autonomy, corresponds to the core of anarcho-primitivist thought. Ellul argues that in the past one could keep their family, spiritual and psychic life out of the influence of technique, but the total integration of the technical phenomenon is making this exceedingly harder,²⁰⁶ as all human activity is both mediated and censored through technique.²⁰⁷ He notes: “Man is caught like a fly in a bottle. His attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique's filing cabinet.”²⁰⁸ He gives the example of humans wanting to express their instinct to be in nature through a camping trip that has been bound by a myriad of regulations. I experienced this first hand when visiting the famed Yellowstone National Park. Here the experience of nature is carefully neutered and streamlined to ensure as many tourists as possible can safely and conveniently pass through, effectively making it a remarkably unnatural experience. In this experience I can choose whatever path I can, as long as they are part of the options that the park administration have set up, as they cannot afford tourists to wander on their own accord. Ellul summarizes this tendency of technical society with a quote by the Nazi politician Dr Goebbels: “You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order.”²⁰⁹ Even successful social movements will only result in the human instinct they embody to be integrated into technical society.²¹⁰ Ellul argues that not realizing humans are not free in these seemingly free areas of life is part of what allows the technical society to exist in such an omnipresent form.²¹¹ This is because it enables technical society to bind a plurality of opposing and interacting societal forces into a singular uniform and static system. The core of the critique of complex technological societies, shared by Zerzan, Kaczynski, Morris, Bookchin and Ellul, has now been reached. When societies grow increasingly more complex and technological, techniques have to be used to keep the system running, which strips away autonomy in almost all aspects of life. The question remains if and how one can combat this.

²⁰⁴ Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 398.

²⁰⁵ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 325.

²⁰⁶ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 410.

²⁰⁷ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 418.

²⁰⁸ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 418.

²⁰⁹ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 420.

²¹⁰ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 427.

²¹¹ Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 410.

3.2.3 Confronting technique: A violent rebellion?

According to Ellul, it is clear that the individual is powerless against the great and interconnected technological system. But one can inquire into the values that one imposes on techniques when using them, and in this way navigate life with great difficulty whilst remaining human in the fullest sense of the world.²¹² This will only turn into a phenomenon with sociological consequences when enough people adopt this metaphorical distance in their use of techniques, allowing “a permanent and basic confrontation between technique's pretensions to resolve all human problems and the human will to escape technical determinism.”²¹³ If the challenge to technique is to be more than the handful of authors discussed hitherto, a great humanist force has to be placed betwixt humanity and technology. As mentioned, Ellul alludes to this force being described in his theology, but the force can take other shapes too. Huxley, for example, in his 1962 novel *Island*, describes an island nation which through a stroke of luck adopted the scientific method and had a buddhist inspired spirituality devoid of dogma that was shared amongst its inhabitants. The shared spirituality acted as a counterforce to the rationality that came from the adopted scientific method and the world around the island. As a result, the inhabitants of the island voluntarily controlled their population to ensure their resources would not be depleted. It also allowed them to judge whether a new technology could contribute to human development and whether it would disrupt the island’s natural balance. The island’s chief scientist states: “[...] We [...] have always chosen to adapt our economy and technology to human beings—not our human beings to somebody else’s economy and technology.”²¹⁴ The island eventually falls victim to an expansionist neighbor, highlighting that the technological system as a whole can only be arrested when a critical counterforce is adopted universally.²¹⁵ Another example of a counterforce to technology might be the deep trust in nature to provide its share to everyone that Bird-David found in her analysis of contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes. This trust effectively disables the need for advanced techniques, as one does not seek to acquire resources in more efficient and disruptive ways. It seems that the insistence on autonomy as posed by the anarcho-primitivists could be an adequate counter force to the efficiency of the system that is central to rationality of civilization. Unfortunately some involved in civilization critique, like Kaczynski, default towards wanting some sort of revolution, whereas Ellul argues that the technological system is too pervasive to be overthrown.²¹⁶

Kaczynski argues that a minority of revolutionaries could destroy modern technological society with the help of technological means.²¹⁷ Even if this revolution would be a global success, it would not end after the demise of the system, as Kaczynski offers no valid reason why a new technological system could not arise. He infers a society where a minority will have to impose their anti-technology sentiments on the masses using technological means, giving rise to a new technological system that similarly disables the autonomy of the individual. In *Autopsy of Revolution*, Ellul argues that he himself does not offer a plan for a (non-violent) revolution because revolution only serves to perfect certain techniques, and thereby advances technological society and not escape it.²¹⁸ This can be seen with Kaczynski and the Mexican eco-extremist group ITS (Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje/Individualists Tending to the Wild) that were inspired by his actions and partook in deadly bombing campaigns in the 2010s aimed primarily at those involved with

²¹² Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 400.

²¹³ Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 412.

²¹⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Island*, HarperCollins, 171, 2009.

²¹⁵ Ellul, *The Technological Order*, 410.

²¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, Alfred A. Knopf, 253, 1971.

²¹⁷ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 78.

²¹⁸ Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, 279.

nanotechnology.²¹⁹ Both are seemingly oblivious to the fact that their actions only served to perfect the techniques involved in bomb-making and the security against these bomb threats.

Still, Kaczynski believed that his actions were justified: “If we had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted. [...] In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.”²²⁰ In *Anti-Tech Revolution*, Kaczynski advises against illegal activities for purely practical reasons as the involvement of law-enforcement or intelligence agencies would greatly diminish the chance of a successful revolution.²²¹ In his 1971 book *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, Ellul argues that revolutionaries, like Kaczynski, see violence as a way of shaking up the conventional and exposing the true condition of humanity to the light of day.²²² This type of violence might eliminate the revolutionary’s hated oppressors, but it is never a decisive change, as a new group of elites will replace the old ones.²²³ Moore agrees that violent revolution could only fuel more systems of control. He argues that true resistance lies in the life-sustaining myths and communal values that come to be through freely chosen actions and interactions characterized by spontaneous creativity. Again, the autonomy of the action is central here. Just like Ellul, Moore argues that these actions have been virtually eradicated in contemporary society. But he holds hope that these drums of spontaneous creativity may be revived: “And if the drums no longer sound, then we must beat them. And if we have no drums, we must build them. And if we’ve forgotten how to play them, we must remember or learn again.”²²⁴

In concluding this chapter, one finds that even though individual life has been subject to sociological determinants since the time of taboos and rites, the scale and complexity of modern civilization, and the pervasiveness of modern technology in all aspects of it, have radically altered the human experience in a relatively short amount of time. In this society, according to Morris, man faces psychological disorders comparable to those suffered by animals in captivity, because they are unable to sustain their own survival directly. He states, however, that one has more autonomy than ever in pursuing the sciences, art and philosophy. Ellul finds these choices superficial compared to spontaneity, creativity and autonomy one gives up when living in a modern technological society guided by blind rationality and efficiency. Ellul argues that the origins of modern technology may be found in the technical activity of primitive man and the love for his own inventions. He admits, however, that he is unsure what enabled primitive man to engage in such activities. An answer to this enigma might be found in the next chapter, which will discuss Plessner’s philosophical anthropology.

²¹⁹ Individualists Tending toward the Wild, *Communiques of ITS*, The Anarchist Library, 2013, Communique 1, Accessed via: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/individualists-tending-toward-the-wild-communiques>.

²²⁰ Kaczynski, *Industrial society*, 65.

²²¹ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech*, 169.

²²² Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, The Seabury Press, 116, 1969.

²²³ Ellul, *Violence*, 118.

²²⁴ Moore, *Beyond the Fragments*.

4. Plessner's philosophical anthropology

Helmut Plessner studied under the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler.²²⁵ The phenomenological tradition spawned after an increasing awareness of the subjectivity of human understanding led philosophers to take experience or consciousness as the starting point of their investigations. Through this lens Plessner sought to study the phenomenon of life in his 1928 book *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*. He argues that the study of the human is fragmented into many specialized disciplines, such as biology and psychology, in which man as a living unit is neglected, “so that only a pale “subject” remained, a mere wire from which existence, reduced to a puppet, performs its dead movements.”²²⁶ He argues that this separation of the human in different spheres of being was set in motion by René Descartes when he split the physical from the spiritual realm. To have a more unified view of man “the theory of the humanities needs a philosophy of nature—that is, a consideration, not empirically restricted, of the physical world from which the spiritual-human world is, after all, built up, on which it depends, with which it works, and that it in turn affects.”²²⁷

4.1 Plessner's typology of life

In contrast to biological definitions that reduce the essence of life to a set of physical properties, Plessner seeks the phenomenon of life in the peculiar way in which living beings relate to their environment. Living beings not only have a contour that separates them from their environment but also a boundary, which allows a two interaction between the living being and its environment. Through these interactions the living being can bleed into the environment and the environment can bleed into it,²²⁸ allowing the living being to position itself to what is outside and to what is within the boundary. Plessner uses the positionality of living beings to separate them into the levels of the plant, the animal, and the human. As these distinctions are not purely empirical he does not have to account for the myriad of transitional forms that exist between the levels.²²⁹

The first level of the plant consists of living beings that have an open positionality. This means that an unbroken relationship exists between what is inside and outside the boundary,²³⁰ in some sense making the living being and the environment one.²³¹ The second level of the animal is characterized by living beings that have specialized organs or centers from which they have a mediated relationship with their environment through their boundary. In this way, the animal has a closed positionality, as it is able to regulate its interactions with its environment, through which it “attains true self-sufficiency—that is, a position in which it is set upon itself, which at the same time provides a new existential foundation.”²³² The animal is not aware of the mediated relationship with its environment as it cannot reflect on itself as existing from a center.²³³ The third level of the human sees the living being take up a position behind and

²²⁵ Jos de Mul, Artificial by Nature. In Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects, edited by Jos de Mul, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 12-13.

²²⁶ Plessner, *Levels*, 33.

²²⁷ Plessner, *Levels*, 22-23.

²²⁸ Plessner, *Levels*, 121.

²²⁹ Plessner, *Levels*, 203.

²³⁰ Phillip Honenberger, Animality, Sociality, and Historicity in Helmut Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 23(5), 2015, 713.

²³¹ Jos de Mul, The Emergence of Practical Self-Understanding, *Human Studies*, 42, 2018, p.73.

²³² Plessner, *Levels*, 209.

²³³ Plessner, *Levels*, 222.

over its own center suspended on nothingness. From this third-person view a person is fully reflexive.²³⁴ In all physical dimensions the excentric being is centric and might still experience as a centric being without reflecting on itself, from a first-person perspective, as it remains tethered to its environment by its body.²³⁵ Plessner In short: “[The human] not only lives and experiences, but also experiences himself experiencing.”²³⁶

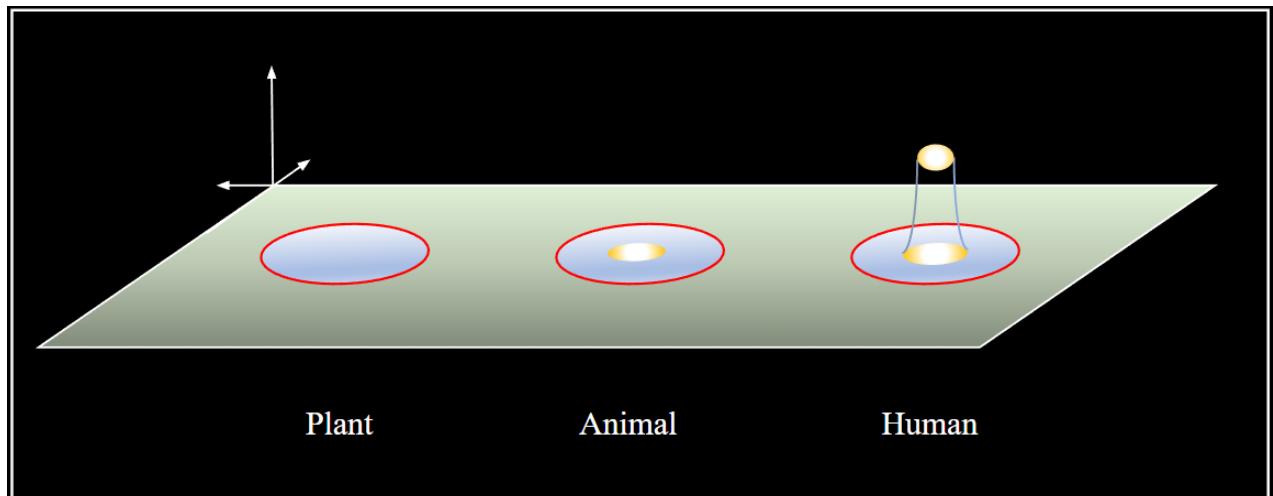


Figure 1: Visualization of Plessner’s typology of life.²³⁷

The uniquely human access to the third person perspective might be explained by the intertwining of ecological and cultural pressures in human evolution put forth hitertho. As Richardson explains: “Participants in human joint behavior need to be mutually aware of the global objectives and consequences of individual contributions—if, that is, individuals and groups are to maximize both the benefits of cooperation and individual development.”²³⁸ In this way, the third person perspective that the excentric viewpoint offers is immensely valuable. But at the same time the human is subject to radical tensions as a result of their fundamentally fractured existence. As a centric being the human experiences existence in the absolute present, immediately involved in nature. But at the same time, one realizes from their excentric point of reference that immediate relations to the environment are always mediated because of the existence of boundaries, separating the living being from its environment. The excentric positionality further causes the human to be ever-suspended in nothingness, outside of space and time, without a home, which just like a more immediate relation with their environment, the human has to create itself. Plessner thus describes the human as being constitutively homeless.²³⁹ The experience of this homelessness is the reason the human stands above the animal according to Plessner and why: “As an excentrically organized being, the human must make himself into what he already is.”²⁴⁰ It is based on

²³⁴ Plessner, *Levels*, 270.

²³⁵ Plessner, *Levels*, 271.

²³⁶ Plessner, *Levels*, 271.

²³⁷ This visualization was based on a two-dimensional image by Jos de Mul, and is adapted from my bachelor thesis: *A critique of Theodore Kaczynski from an excentric point of view* (2019). The greenish plane represents the environment from which living beings are separated by a red boundary. The animal and human levels have a yellow center from which they have a mediated relationship with the environment. The human possesses an excentric view that cannot be grasped by the lowel levels. Through this view the being becomes aware of its mediated relationship with the environment..

²³⁸ Richardson, *Genes, brains, and human potential*, 272.

²³⁹ Plessner, *Levels*, 287.

²⁴⁰ Plessner, *Levels*, 287.

these tensions that Plessner defines the three anthropological laws that explain how humans cope with their brokenness.

4.2 The anthropological laws

As the human must make themselves in what they already are, they cannot only live in their natural state but need an artificial complement to act as a counterbalance to the excentric core of their being in the hopes of creating an equilibrium. This is Plessner's first law of natural artificiality.²⁴¹ With this law, Plessner rejects tool usage as having purely evolutionary benefits. He states that this overlooks the substantive character of even the simplest tools, and how they detach from the process of their invention to create a counterweight to excentricity.²⁴² As the tools detach from the creative process, the equilibrium can never last, and more creative action has to be undertaken as a result. This illustrates why man creates artificial means, but Plessner does not write about how constant technological advances, starting from the ones that required division of labor according to Zerzan, could lead man to feeling more broken and out of tune with one's nature. The human is artificial from their third person view, allowing them to manipulate their environment with creative action. Plessner and Zerzan agree that by doing so repeatedly man domesticates themselves,²⁴³ but as Ellul notes the rationality of the artificial is opposed to the natural and "destroys, eliminates, or subordinates" it at every turn.²⁴⁴ In this way, acting from one's third person view can impede on one's experience of life from the 'natural' first person view. This idea is reflected in the civilization critique of Zerzan and Ellul, where the efficiency and complexity of man's creations swallow one's autonomy and ability to live in a less artificial setting. It seems thus that Plessner's focus on the ontic necessity for technical activity makes him overlook its negative consequences.

The animal is not aware of its own centricity so it experiences its relationship with the environment as immediate. Through their excentricity the human is aware of the mediatedness of this immediate relationship. This is Plessner's second law of mediated immediacy. He states that creative action or expressivity is man's attempt to gain immediate connection with the world, but as these creations gain their own weight the contact will always be mediated. This means that man must partake in an endless string of creative pursuits to maintain fulfillment. Plessner calls this expressivity "the true motor of the specifically historical dynamism of human life."²⁴⁵ Here we find the origin of Wright's myth of progress, as man's past creations have never created balance; the human "thinks that unprecedented means are always required for its satisfaction."²⁴⁶ Zerzan notes with his aforementioned example of the telephone, how the increasingly mediated relations with our surroundings might give immediate access to anyone around the world but this comes at the cost of keeping people physically distant from each other. Ellul states similarly that acting through intermediaries has made man lose contact with reality. Plessner justly ascribes man's constant need for expressivity to their nature but does not describe the negative consequences when this need is left unrestrained. As Jos de Mul states: "The technological modification of our positionality and the distribution and transformation of our [excentricity] might intensify the

²⁴¹ Plessner, *Levels*, 288.

²⁴² Plessner, *Levels*, 298.

²⁴³ Plessner, *Levels*, 294.

²⁴⁴ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 79.

²⁴⁵ Plessner, *Levels*, 314-315.

²⁴⁶ Plessner, *Levels*, 316.

alienation that is inherent in the [excentric] life form and that constantly evokes our attempts to overcome this alienation.”²⁴⁷

The first two anthropological laws establish that a system of artificial objects can only temporarily soothe the constitutive homelessness of man. Through the excentric viewpoint one becomes aware of the absolute contingency of existence and thus comes to the idea of a sense of the absolute, a solid ground of the world on which everything must stand, or god. Plessner states that from one’s being suspended in nothingness even this idea of the absolute ground of the world must be doubted.²⁴⁸ This is the law of the utopian standpoint. One’s constitutive homelessness can only be mended as long as a leap of faith is maintained, anchoring oneself in the absolute of religion. Jos de Mul argues that in current society technology has taken over the role of religion.²⁴⁹ This is a sentiment shared by Ellul, Zerzan and Kaczynski, who all argue that technological advancement should not be taken as necessarily moving towards a better or ideal society. In their critique, however, each of these thinkers holds faith in their own ideological or religious anchor: Ellul finds an antidote to blind faith in technology in his theological works, Zerzan longs for the romanticized bliss of pre-symbolic community and Kaczynski wants to struggle for survival in a natural setting. Nevertheless, in doing so, all three find ways of addressing the contingency of the complex technological society we find ourselves in, and opening the way towards alternative ways of being that might be less alienated. They also show that even though some of our nature longs for the artificial, we do best to take some restrain in practicing technical activity, or as Ellul states, be aware of the values we impose on it, in order to not further alienate the part of us that is centric and still very much rooted in the physical world, in which we long to act without being determined by complex techniques.

Plessner notes that the three anthropological laws form the basis for the human need for social organization and argues that alienation is a vital part of this.²⁵⁰ In *Limits of Community*, he defends a modern society with abstract and impersonal social relations against those that argue for a communal form of living, like the anarcho-primitivists. He states that purely communal living, in which members express themselves with unconditional sincerity is paid for with the renunciation of the private sphere of individuality. Society, on the other hand, makes people interact in the public sphere behind a mask of anonymity according to certain rules, giving one the ease of not having to appear how one truly is and run the risk of a disappointing self-revelation. Society also gives one meaning “beyond mere utility to the chores and tasks necessary for life and provides a stimulus to build from this new meaning the strength to endure what is contrary to nature.”²⁵¹ This sentiment is shared by Morris who sees great worth in modern man’s ability to engage in the arts, science and philosophy. Although it is hard to deny this merit of society, one can argue that an impersonal sphere is a necessity stemming from man’s excentricity only to the degree that our need for progress and artificiality create complex societies that make that we cannot function in them without impersonal relations. As Ellul states, even in ancient times of more communal living, man was to some degree sociologically determined by taboos and rituals, but now in complex societies these determinants infiltrate one’s life to the extent that the delineation of a private sphere is necessary. Although Zerzan might have been overly romantic in dreaming up a communal way of living devoid of ritual, he is right in stating that “the theme of ritual points to an absence that it falsely claims to fill, as does symbolic culture in general.”²⁵² As the human moves towards more mediation with the world

²⁴⁷ Jos de Mul, Philosophical Anthropology 2.0. In Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects, edited by Jos de Mul, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 473.

²⁴⁸ Plessner, *Levels*, 320.

²⁴⁹ De Mul, *Anthropology*, 20.

²⁵⁰ Plessner, *Levels*, 319.

²⁵¹ Helmuth Plessner, The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism, Humanity Books, 88, 1999.

²⁵² Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 9-10.

through rituals and techniques in the hopes of gaining a sense of unity from their excentric viewpoint, they lose sight of their centric roots through which they can still experience, albeit only temporarily, this unity as already given to them.

5. Discussions

The philosophical problem that this thesis wished to address is as follows: *Anarcho-primitivism sees the human condition as radically opposed to what is artificial, whereas the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner sees the human condition as being radically artificial. Can a synthesis of these views be established that confines this radical artificiality to a distinct part of the human condition, allowing us to remain fundamentally critical of the negative societal consequences that it causes, and delineate distinct parts of the human condition that are radically not artificial?*

John Zerzan's Anarcho-primitivism highlights the contingency of civilization. Zerzan's line of thinking displays how vastly different, and less determined by sociological phenomena, one lived at the start of human existence. In his analysis Zerzan tries to strip all culture from human nature by putting forth a reductionist view of human evolution that sees man living in undisturbed band societies for roughly two million years right up until the point of the introduction of symbolic culture. This neglects evidence of social organization gradually growing in complexity over this time and, as Ken Richardson argues, living in these relatively complex social organizations has shaped human cognition and behavior to a significant degree, making that nature and culture have been entangled for most if not all of human existence. This does not take away from the notion shared by Zerzan, Theodore Kaczynski and Jacques Ellul, that life in earlier forms of social organization was not determined to the same degree and intensity by sociological phenomena. Ellul highlights the phenomenon of technique, the totality of rational and absolutely efficient methods, as structuring individual behavior in such a way that "man is caught like a fly in a bottle. His attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique's filing cabinet."²⁵³ Even a revolution against this system dominated by technique, as Kaczynski urges, is fruitless, as it only provides more opportunity for the techniques involved in the revolution, such as bomb-making, to be perfected.

Helmuth Plessner shows that the phenomenon of technique has roots in human nature that go beyond evolutionary benefit. His anthropological laws show that man's excentricity makes that one is suspended beyond space and time from which one's mediated relationship with the environment and the rootlessness of one's existence becomes apparent, making them constitutively homeless. This fractured existence urges and enables man to find an artificial counterweight to their excentric viewpoint with creative action. The equilibrium never lasts as the counterweight has to become detached from the process of its invention. This urges man to endlessly perform creative action as one "thinks that unprecedented means are always required for its satisfaction."²⁵⁴ Plessner notes that this constant expressivity has historically propelled man towards progress, but as these drives became autonomous in the phenomenon of modern technique, as Ellul notes, they came at the cost of true autonomy in virtually all aspects of life, and, as Ronald Wright notes, at the cost of living in balance with the environment.

²⁵³ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 418.

²⁵⁴ Plessner, *Levels*, 316.

Plessner defends civilization as it soothes the excentric part of man that longs for artificial supplements, but neglects that living in a way that tailors solely to this urge, might create a society that suffocates the part of man that is centric, rooted in the physical world, where one does not experience a boundary but bleeds into the environment just as the environment bleed into it. These are not necessarily spiritual experiences, but are actions that bring one in contact with others and the environment in a way that is largely unmediated, steered or streamlined by vast amounts of techniques, as the anarcho-primitivists prescribe. Contemporary blind faith in the products of civilization, mainly technology, provide a solid ground to man's existence, from which man's constant desire to create even more efficient mediations with the world can be justified, as they are means to manifest an increasingly better and more advanced utopia. This belief disables one to see the values man imposes on technology and the origins of the constant desire for artificial supplements. When one inquires into the latter through the typology of life that Plessner created, this desire can be confined as stemming from man's excentric viewpoint. This excentric viewpoint is constituted upon man's animal-like centricity, from which point complex civilization is comparable to, as Desmond Morris notes, a human zoo. By having a blind focus on or attributing superiority to the part of man that is artificial and inventive, his animality is engaged, and although a certain level of alienation and suffering will always be part of human existence because of its constitutive homelessness, these experiences can be greatly alleviated or exacerbated, depending on the degree to which man's centric nature is able to manifest in society.

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