



TAKE  
WHAT  
YOU  
NEED

AND COMPOST THE REST

an anarchist introduction to post-civilization theory



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Well, that civilization thing was interesting, now wasn't it? I mean, it certainly seemed worth a shot. We got a lot out of it: telescopes, wheelchairs, wikipedia. But we also just about took out the natural world. Science, agriculture, and specialization have done a lot for expanding cultural ideas and communication, but they've done even more for genocide and ecocide.

So it's time we gave up the noble, failed experiment altogether and moved on to something new.

### **Premise One: We Hate Civilization**

This civilization is, from its foundation, unsustainable. It probably cannot be salvaged, and what's more, it would be undesirable to do so. When we're discussing civilization, we're discussing the entirety of the modern world's organizational structures and approaches to culture. We're talking about the legal and societal codes that dictate "proper" behavior. We're talking about the centralizing and expanding urges of political and economic empire.

Civilization is destroying all life on earth. It's unsustainable: growth-based economies and societies always are. Civilization is nigh unredeemable: there seems to be an infinitesimally slim chance that civilization will drop its resource over-consumption and move rapidly towards a sustainable way of existing. And even if it did, we don't want it. It would still be an imposition on our freedom.

Civilization has been defined in all sorts of ways, but none of them actually make it sound very good when you think much about it. My dictionary defines civilization as "the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced." Aside from being a sort of useless definition, this points out the prejudice inherent in civilization. It says: "We are advanced. You are primitive. What's more, history and development is purely linear in nature, progress only moves forward, and any deviation from the course we are on is regressive."

Another working definition of civilization can be derived from Wikipedia, which often provides the sort of cultur-

al consensus on a given term. Wikipedia describes civilization as “a society defined as a complex society characterized by the practice of agriculture and settlement in cities ... Compared with less complex structures, members of a civilization are organized into a diverse division of labor and an intricate social hierarchy.” This definition, too, points out the flaws in civilization. An intricate social hierarchy? Why have we all chosen a world that puts up with that kind of crap?

Derrick Jensen, an anti-civilization theorist (but not a post-civilized one), has proposed another useful definition of civilization: “a culture—that is, a complex of stories, institutions, and artifacts—that both leads to and emerges from the growth of cities (civilization, see *civil*: from *civis*, meaning citizen, from Latin *civitatis*, meaning city-state).” Which of course leads us to ask what, exactly, a city is. Derrick defines a city, for the purpose of his definition of civilization, as: “people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require the routine importation of food and other necessities of life.”

And that, perhaps, is the point of all of this. If a place requires resources from elsewhere, everything is fine when they can trade for them. But when their farming neighbors experience a drought and can't provide a surplus for trade? Then you have war. Great.

We hate civilization.

## **Premise Two: We're Not Primitivists**

It is neither possible, nor desirable, to return to a pre-civilized state of being. Most of the groundwork of anti-civilization thought—important work, mind you—has been laid down by primitivists. Primitivists believe, by and large, that humanity would be better served by returning to a pre-civilized way of life. This is not a view that we share.

Primitivists reject technology. We just reject the inappropriate use of technology. Now, to be fair, that's almost all of the uses of technology we see in the civilized world. But our issue with most primitivist theory is one of babies and bathwater. Sure, most technologies are being put to rather evil uses—whether warfare or simple ecocide—but that doesn't make technology (“The application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes.”) inherently evil. It just means that we need to completely re-imagine how we interact with machines, with tools, even with science. We need to determine whether something is useful and sustainable, rather than judging things purely on their economic or military value.

Primitivists reject agriculture. We simply reject monoculture, which is abhorrent and centralizing, destroys regional autonomy, forces globalization on the world, and leads to horrific practices like slash-and-burn farming. We also reject other stupid ideas of how to feed humanity, like setting 6 billion people loose in the woods to hunt and gather. By and large, post-civ folks embrace permaculture: agricultural systems designed from the outset to be sustainable in whatever given area they are developed

Primitivists have done a good job of exploring the problems of civilization, and for this we commend them. But, on the whole, their critique is un-nuanced.

What's more, the societal structure they envision, tribalism (note that what our society's view of what tribalism is is mostly based on faulty, euro-centric anthropology), can be socially conservative: what many tribes lacked in codified law they made up for with rigid "customs," and one generation is born into the near-exact way of life as their predecessors.

We cannot, en masse, return to a pre-civilized way of life. And honestly, most of us don't want to. We refuse a blanket rejection of everything that civilization has brought us. We need to look forward, not backwards.

We are not primitivists.

### **Premise Three: We Are Post-Civilized**

It is therefore desirable to imagine and enact a post-civilized culture. This is something we can do here and now in the thrashing endgame of civilization.

There are so many false dichotomies in the world. The amateur and the professional musician both have so much to offer, and we post-civilized folks generally cultivate both specialized and generalized skills. Someone has got to get good at lens grinding—and optometry—but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to cook a decent meal, or help weed your neighbor's garden.

One of civilization's greatest faults is its attempt to homogenize a global culture, to spread one set of ideas of how everything—from governance to architecture to agriculture to music—must be done "properly." But if you build flat-roofed houses in cold climates, snow is going to build up and your roof is going to collapse. If you fell trees from a hillside the same as you do in the valleys, your soil is going to erode.

So moving towards post-civilization—with or without industrial collapse—is a matter of looking around oneself, one's community, and one's landbase, and determining what is appropriate. What this means is that, in

the here and now, there are parts of civilized culture we can utilize to our benefit that we might not be able to two generations after a collapse. For those in the first world, our most abundant resource is trash.

We post-civilized aim to prove that decentralization of our culture, economies, and politics is both possible and desirable. Every smaller group would make its own decisions, maintain its autonomy, and solve problems in the ways that suit its constituency.

Good food can be rescued and eaten. Rotten food can be composted and used to build raised bed gardens atop otherwise poisonous city soil. Paper that is blank on one or both sides can be bound into notebooks. Other paper can be pulped in a blender, spread onto screens, and pressed with a repurposed hydraulic car jack. Roadkill can be skinned and butchered. Electric toys can be scavenged, their circuit boards and motors repurposed. Used vegetable oil can

be rescued out of grease traps and used to power our cars or even our generators.

And the critics will say this can't work forever, and they'll look confused when we nod our heads in agreement. Because we'll adapt with the shifting landscape, because what works in one time or place may not work elsewhere or elsewhen.

Civilization thinks that culture naturally trickles down from the civil to the savage, from the urban to the rural. We don't.

We are post-civilized.

### **If We Had Our Way**

What does a city look like if it's not a city anymore? The concept of the city, as an entity of its own with specified boundaries, centralized government, and the routine importation of necessities, must be done away with. But we're not all going to scatter out into the surrounding countryside, oh no.

The post-civilized city (Non-city? Urban area? Terminology is a bit hard.) might look like a city would if you ignored its government. The society would consist of smaller groups that retain their individual identities but are capable of working together for the common good.



We post-civilized aim to prove that decentralization of our culture, economies, and politics is both possible and desirable. Every smaller group (some might use the word tribe, but I personally shy from it) would make its own decisions, maintain its autonomy, and solve problems in the ways that suit its constituency. Some might turn to high technology to meet their needs and desires. Others might live more simply. But the borders between the groups will most likely be blurred, with individuals, groups, and families moving between social spheres. Honestly, it would socially be much like today, if you removed the hierarchy between groups and actively avoided the centralizing influence of civilized culture.

Will these groups ever fight? Probably. No system is perfect, and it is better to admit that forthrightly than pretend it is otherwise. We paint no utopia here. But there have been movements in the past that have developed political structures to allow groups with diverse interests to interact peacefully. One of those movements that we are influenced by is syndicalism.

Syndicalism is an economic system totally outside of the capitalist/state-socialist dichotomy. It suggests that a federation of collectivized trade unions might promote mutual aid between members. For a bit of history of when syndicalism successfully functioned in a developed nation, look into the Spanish Civil War.

Mutual aid, then, is the opposite of competition. Wikipedia describes it as “the economic concept of voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit.” One of the earliest anarchists—and evolutionary biologists—was Peter Kropotkin, who advocated against Darwin’s suggestion that nature was simply the war of one against all. Instead, he argued, intra-species cooperation is at least as much an evolutionary force as competition. What’s more, modern science has finally come around and has begun to believe him.

Now, we’re not exactly syndicalists, either. Syndicalism is a lovely idea, but we’re not talking about trade unions, and we’re not talking about industrialization. We should cling to the tenets of historical anarchism no more than we should cling to second-wave feminism, or, for that matter, civilization. No, we’re talking about dynamic groups of people coming together organically to make the few decisions that would impact the non-city at large.

We’re talking about the steampunks over here perfecting solar distilleries by use of Fresnel lenses while another group of bike enthusiasts over there spends their time racing, doing courier work for other groups, and forging bicycles out of found pipe. A semi-nomadic clique of teenagers will move out into the wilds of the abandoned suburbs and herd goats, while a hermit

whiles her time growing potatoes in stacked tires and recording classical piano onto wax cylinders.

Someone is going to wire up his Super Nintendo to a solar panel array, and folks from all walks of life are going to come over to play Street Fighter, or just to watch. We're all going to grow most of our own food, and we're all going to deal with our own trash, wash our own dishes.

## **The Collapse**

And of course, if we had it our way we would move past civilization as peacefully as possible, as non-destructively as possible. We would organize from the bottom up. We'd present solutions that are so reasonable that those in power with ethics will join us and those without ethics will see their economic might dwindle away as more people refuse to participate in civilized exchange.

But this isn't likely, to be honest. Our society is on a collision course with history. It's possible that the only question is which will collapse first: industrial civilization or the earth's ability to sustain human life. If that's the case, then we'd better hope (or act) for the former.

The collapse of industrial civilization, if it comes, will be horrible. Not one of us, not even those of us who secretly or openly long for the apocalypse, will enjoy it. But contrary to Hollywood lies, the best in people often comes out in crisis. Nothing brings a neighborhood together like a blackout; nothing gets people to sharing like food shortages. (What, you thought we'd all hoard our food and then duke it out with shotguns, kill or be killed, neighbors setting fire to one another's houses? Humans don't always do that. What do you think we are, civilized?)

But if our economy doesn't give way, and we don't figure out cold fusion (as well as a massive re-stocking of the world's oceans), we'll face something much, much worse. Ecological collapse will shatter the world as we know it. If any of us are alive when the dust has cleared, nothing will be the same.

We need to be done with civilization as soon as possible, lest civilization destroy us all.

## **In The Meantime**

We want to not be civilized any longer. It's time to move on. We want to reject crazy hierarchies and delusional economics, colonialism and nation-states. But it just so happens that we aren't given much of a chance to opt out. Civilization has never, not once in its history, allowed room for those who aren't civilized to flourish. It's to the degree that you might think this a

defining characteristic of civilization: civilization is so afraid of being wrong that it simply cannot abide by others who live in other fashions.

And even if we did successfully opt out, that wouldn't stop civilization from destroying the earth.

But let's be optimists again for a second. The earth is going to die or the earth is not going to die. Civilization is going to fall, or civilization is not going to fall. What are we going to do, here and now, in our lives?

I don't want to get into how one might get involved in the epic battle to save the earth, to destroy civilization, to prevent or promote the collapse of this or that. Those are the sorts of ethical choices that one must make for oneself.

But I will encourage that you find or develop a post-civilized lifestyle. In a way, it's easy. Close your eyes, and imagine who you would be without social constraints. What would you do if you were dependent upon only yourself, your friends, and the resources you can find around yourself. What would you wear? What would you eat? Perhaps the more important questions are subtler: how would you treat your friends? How would you like to be treated?

In the here and now, we learn survival skills: skinning and tanning and wire-stripping, archery and gunpowder-making, Herbalism and acupuncture, yes, but we also study the application (and making) of antibiotics, methods of surgery and dentistry. We permaculture, we rewild, and we scavenge the urban, suburban, and rural landscapes alike, learning what it means to be sustainable in a dying world. We tear up our lawns and leave only gardens. Of course, one day, we're going to tear up the pavement and leave only bikepaths.

We practice community responses to problems within our subculture, like how to deal with physical and sexual assault without involving the police. We learn about trauma (the hard way, most of the time) and how to deal with it. We keep chickens and ducks, we eat dandelions and cattails.

We live, as much as we can, as though civilization were a blight that is behind us already. And this, more than any writing, will be our propaganda. Because yes, you can live this way. And yes, it is better. A meal means so much more when you grow or gather it yourself, and friends are so much closer when they're treated as equals. Feral in a tailcoat, that's us. When we look at the world around us, we take what we need and compost the rest.

COOPERATIVE  
SCAVENGING



*“We have no more interest in repairing civilization than a scrapyard does in repairing cars. When you see a roadkill deer, you don’t attempt emergency breathing—you skin and eat it. Well, if you eat meat.”*  
—Sara Czolgosz

In the previous issue, I laid out the basics of post-civilization theory (affectionately referred to by most people I know as “post-civ”). The really, really short version of it is: we don’t like civilization, but we’re not primitivists either. Oh sure, we learned a lot from our relationship with civilization, but in the end, it was just too abusive. It’s time to break up, it’s time to move on.

In this issue, we’re going to take a close look at post-civilized approaches to production and highlight a possible way to undermine the capitalist economic system.

### **The Scavenger Versus the Civilian**

Let’s say there’s a civilian, and she’s hungry. She chooses a recipe from the cookbook and then goes to the store to purchase the ingredients.

Elsewhere, there’s a scavenger that’s hungry too. She looks to see what food is available and plans her meal accordingly. At all times, she’s passively on the lookout for food, from her garden, from the dumpsters, the discount bins, or gleaned from wild plants.

You might have guessed it: we post-civilized favor the scavenger approach. This applies to most all things, from art to science to education. We favor this approach for so many reasons (admittedly, aesthetic taste is among them).

The civilized idea is that productivity exists for its own sake: automobile manufacturers make cars because it’s what they do. At no point is the question asked, “Have we made enough cars yet?” (The answer to that question, by the way, is obviously yes. Even if we wanted a car culture, we have all the personal automobiles we could possibly need, waiting to be repaired or improved upon.) Forests get cleared and new houses get built while buildings elsewhere sit empty.

This sort of behavior is not reflective of the cunning and resourcefulness of the animal we evolved to be. It's a cultural imposition forced upon us by civilization.

A civilian will shop for ideologies like she's buying a new phone, taking a gander at a few before picking one right off the shelf. A scavenger will dissect ideologies, collect the interesting bits, and put them together with other ideas to form her own worldview.

Because, when it comes down to it, a scavenger is a hacker, a hacker is a scavenger.

"That's fine and good for a tiny minority," you might be thinking (or, more interestingly, screaming and gesticulating wildly), "but an entire society couldn't function as scavengers: who would grow the food? Who would build the tables?"

And you'd probably be right, if you were thinking or yelling that. Most of us live in population densities too high to sustain a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. But hunter-gatherer isn't what we're going for, exactly. We'll grow food, we just aren't going to grow monocultured corn for export. We'll still build tables, but we'll build them out of what's available, and we'll build them where it's appropriate.

This isn't about a purity of approach. In fact, it isn't about purity at all.

## **Undermining the Capitalist Economy**

We want to use the resources that are available to us already before we go about making more. How, then, do we restructure society to allow for this? Revolution is always a possibility, albeit one without a tremendous track record. Collapse? Civilization, at least the global one, is as likely as not going to do itself in at some point. But who wants to die, and who wants to wait until we've left the land and oceans scorched and devoid of life?

Post-civilization theory posits that it's useful to begin to live post-civilized here and now, whether or not a rev-ocalypse is going to save us in a year or two. So how are we going to do it?

Nothing I'll talk about in this column, today or ever, is meant as prescriptive. But there are a couple ideas out there.

One of them is to begin to supplant the market capitalist economy, right the hell now. The co-op and syndicalist movements of the 19th and 20th century were on the right track: the co-ops took the middleman out and distributed directly to people, saving everyone money. And the syndicalists took control of industry by firing their bosses and working as equals. But we don't really want money or industry, certainly not on the scale we have today.

If most of the things—the actual tangible objects we need—have already been made, it can be as simple as getting them to people free of charge. Free stores, we call them in the US (and give-away shops elsewhere, I believe). These are storefronts operated by volunteers that act as secondhand shops in which everything is free.

But by and large, these storefronts are isolated and cannot handle the enormous mass of goods that will otherwise be wasted every day in the civilized world. So then, my proposal, to be enacted on a citywide level:

- Rent or purchase a warehouse. Store donated and acquired resources.
- Rent, purchase, or squat storefronts in multiple neighborhoods throughout the town. Distribute said resources.

As more people's needs are met outside of market economics, the less they will depend upon that market. With less people shopping, the capitalist economy will suffer, leaving more people dependent upon the new, alternative economy, which will experience growth. Eventually, the old methods will be obsolete. The gift economy will grow beyond secondhand items to include food, artisan crafts, and volunteer labor.

There are two major obstacles to overcome on the local level in order to be effective: rent and the clubhouse effect.

By starting with a network of stores (and a warehouse), rather than a single location, we can hope to minimize the clubhouse effect. People often feel alienated by the cliquish nature of radical circles. Some people who have pointed this

out in the past feel like the proper solution then is to water down our politics, or to ascertain that we in no way look or act “weird.” This is the lowest-common-denominator approach that, among other things, explains why large-scale majoritarian democracy always leads to such bland, useless culture and politics.

So instead of a single homogenous radical culture, it’s best to have a large number of diverse cultures acting in solidarity with one another. Allow the central warehouse to be common ground for all of the groups, but let each individual free store be as subcultural as it wants. Just be certain to encourage all subcultures to participate and get in on the act.

The issue of rent can be more complicated. The stores could run on a voluntary subscription model: subscription carries no specific, tangible benefits (like the first pick of the best recycled stuff), but would encourage people to donate some portion of their income every month to pay the rent on the individual stores and the central warehouse. Obviously, methods that minimize costs may be necessary. This can work with no paid staff (after all, a full-time volunteer ought to be able to live entirely off the goods within the gift economy!), bike carts and bakfiets can be used to transport goods whenever possible, and storefronts can be squatted in places where open squats are tolerated.

But these obstacles are, really, quite minor. And now, in what yet might be the death throes of the existing economy, the need of—and opportunity for—a better method of economics has never been greater.



# SO YOU'VE DECIDED TO REJECT CIVILIZATION



Congratulations! You've decided to reject civilization! There are so many reasons why you might have done so.

Maybe you've watched so many post-apocalypse movies or read so many books and comics that you really wish the world would hurry up and end so you can get on with living as you'd like to. Maybe you've intellectually come to understand the horrors of the modern political system, and have determined that its roots run all the way back to when some folks started locking up food and only giving it out in exchange for labor. Maybe you've looked to the world around you and decided that the monstrous evils being perpetuated against the natural earth really are unforgivable, and the complex of societies that has allowed that to happen ought to be destroyed—or at best ignored. Maybe you just like harvesting wild food but don't see why we have to give up living in cities.

Whatever your reasoning, we're quite happy to have you in the ranks of the post-civilized.

A few suggestions:

- Examine your surroundings. See what resources are available for your use, and plan accordingly.
- Actively recycle and reuse everything.
- Eschew money. If a problem can be solved without money, don't use it.
- Find your people. Work with them. Network with other groups.
- Specialize in one or two skills that you can offer. Generalize in a ton of skills.

This information is known to be applicable in the United States and is generally true of other “developed” nations. Much of it is applicable elsewhere throughout the world, but certainly, the post-civilized must adopt different tactics in different bioregions.

### **Food:**

Food? If you're in the “developed” world, food is the easy part. And when I say “easy part,” I mean, “thing that will supplant all other desires in your brain and potentially consume a great portion of your time.” But compared to shelter or health care, getting food is easy.

There is food everywhere. Even in the cities, there are wild edibles: the last place I was living, we ate dandelion greens (get young leaves, steam them and change the water once), clover (eat it right off the ground), acorns (soak the tannins out by leaving them in a running creek for a few days—or boil in a few changes of water—then grind into flour), and various nuts like chestnuts. Ornamental oranges can be made into marmalade. Mesquite pods can be ground into flour. Many people with fruit trees in their yards usually don't mind or notice if you glean, and it rarely hurts to ask. If you eat meat, there's roadkill. In the city, you'll find squirrels and cats. Outside the city, you'll find a lot larger and tastier animals. You have to be careful with roadkill, of course. Eat freshly killed animals, and learn how to prepare them for eating from somewhere that isn't this article. I don't touch the stuff, I'm vegan.

Then there's the garbage. People throw away food all of the time. For the purposes of the urban forager, there are essentially two varieties: dumpstered and left-overs. If you head on over to the dumpster behind any given grocery store, you'll find food in the trash pretty much every night. The trick to eating dumpstered food is to figure out why it was thrown away. Sometimes food is tossed because it's past its expiration date: if so, you can usually smell it to see if it's gone bad. Look for puffy lids as a sign that food might actually not be edible. Sometimes food gets thrown away because the box is torn, or because one glass jar of sauce broke and they threw away the whole box of jars. Bruised produce is common, as are ripe bananas. When you eat dumpstered food, you often get food in bulk; it's good to have a system to distribute this bounty to your friends. What else are you going to do with 40 gallons of orange juice? Remember to wash your hands before you eat anything. You could wear gloves, but then other dumpster-divers might make fun of you.

Dumpstering is sometimes illegal, depending on where you are, and often the best food is thrown out at the end of the night. But if you're wandering around hungry during the day, you can swallow your pride and dig through trash cans on the street corner. If a half-eaten falafel sounds good to you (and it does to me), then you might as well eat it. I find it best to just take from the top of the trash can, and to look out for contamination.

A lot—but certainly not all—of the post-civilized also shoplift food. Usually from larger, corporate stores. Universal morality is one of the things that we'll be glad to get rid of as we abandon civilization: instead, we have our individual ethical codes.

And finally, there's guerrilla gardening. Grow food in every available bit of green space. Even if you don't eat it yourself, whoever does will thank you.

### **Clothing:**

Wear whatever you want. This should be true all the time, of course, but it so rarely is. Civilized people just don't dress like they're extras in a Mad Max movie. (Which is a

damn shame!) Civilized people are really concerned with what other people might think about what they wear.

But the important thing about thinking outside the box is: well, if you're only thinking outside the box, you're still not thinking within the full range of possibilities. Don't be strange just to be strange: be strange because it's who you are. Or hell, wear suit and tie. People get so caught up about clothes.

If you're looking to fit in with the civilized, it shouldn't be hard. People are throwing away and giving away clothes all of the time. But while it's useful to be able to camouflage yourself, it's often a strong desire for the aesthetic of re-use and re-appropriation that draws us away from civilization in the first place. If society, and its conventions, didn't exist, what would you wear? What would you look like? What's available to incorporate into this garb?

Dental floss makes wonderful thread, as does sinew, as does, well, thread. Once you start looking through the trash, you'll never run short of materials to work with.

### **Shelter:**

Finding or making shelter is sometimes difficult. The civilized put a lot of stock into owning land, which they call "property" and seek to privatize. In most countries, it's perfectly legal (despite being remarkably rude) to own vacant buildings, preventing anyone else from using them without actually doing anything with them themselves.

Fortunately, the post-civilized don't put much stock in law—though we're smart enough to know that other folks do—and squatting abandoned buildings is certainly an ethical thing to do. Squatting is complicated and contextual, with few situations being quite the same. But if I may be rude and generalize, there are two types of squatters: squatters who build up the places that they live in, turning them into fantastical wonderlands of potential; and squatters who piss in the corner and generally turn the place to shit.

The point of dropping out of civilization isn't to pass out drunk every night (though it isn't so hard to brew your own alcohol!), it's to liberate ourselves and present to the world a more complex, diverse, and natural way of living.

Another time-honored tradition is to find a bit of woods and build a shack, usually of repurposed and recycled materials.

Some opt to compromise and buy or rent, usually living in high density so as to keep prices down. Shacks get built on rental properties, lofts get built in the living room, etc.

### **Wait a second!**

“Aren’t you just parasitizing something that you claim to be against if you live off of civilization’s discards? Aren’t you as tied into and dependent on consumerism as someone who goes out and just buys the stuff?”

Of course, if you want to look at it that way. But we’re not talking about simple (and respectable!) freeganism. We’re talking about living post-civilized. In any given context, we’re going to look around ourselves and see what’s available. Right now, there’s a hell of a lot. After the collapse, things are going to look a whole lot different.

### **Generalize and Specialize:**

Being independent is a wonderful thing. But having people on whom you can rely is finer still. So learn how to take care of yourself: grow, find, and cook food; repair your own clothes, tools, and toys; learn about health, first aid, and first-response emergency care; learn how to fight, at least enough to knock someone down and run; learn how consensus decision making works. Hell, there’s lots to learn.

But you don’t need to master every single skill. People get so caught up in how specialization is either wonderful (say the civilized) or oppressive (say the primitivists) without really pausing to consider that generalization and specialization don’t need to compete.

Everyone ought to know to take garlic in their tea if they’re getting sick, but for the full range of mental and physical ailments that can be treated herbally? You need a specialist. And while one person specializes in that, someone else is going to keep making antibiotics (there is nothing that the civilized know that we cannot learn).

Personally? I’m not going to spend all of my time learning how to design permacultured gardens. But I’ll sure volunteer when it’s time for harvest.

HOW TO  
SURVIVE THE  
COLLAPSE OF  
CIVILIZATION



The first thing to know about surviving the apocalypse is this: *you're not going to survive the apocalypse*. You're not special. If everyone dies? That includes you. If the ecological crisis that triggers the collapse (my money is on runaway global warming, personally) doesn't get you, then the further militarization of our society probably will.

If you want to survive, and I cannot express this strongly enough, *you should not go run and hide in your little isolated cabin somewhere by yourself or with five of your friends!* (Unless there are zombies.) If you simply retreat and wait for the world to right itself, you're a coward and not even a very bright one; if you leave all of the work to other people, things aren't going to come out so pretty. It is this sort of cowardice, this individualistic gusto, that arguably got us into this trouble in the first place. If you stand idly by and watch a fascistic army take control, you will, in the end, die. If you don't try to organize with people to kickstart a permacultured agriculture to feed people, you will, in the end, die. If you live with two other people and never see another living soul again in your life? You might survive, but you might very well wish you hadn't. When your appendix ruptures and whoops you forgot that your brother isn't a surgeon? You will die.

Like it or not, humans are social animals. Our best hope to stay alive, and furthermore, to thrive, after an apocalyptic event is to discover social solutions.

Staying in settled areas can be dangerous too, of course. Hunger does monstrous things to people. But in most apocalyptic literature there's this assumption that everyone else will join "roving gangs" that pillage the survivors. This will only happen if we let it. We've been told by civilization, with its specialized class of rulers and politicians, that we can't organize ourselves. This is nonsense. Organization isn't something that we simply get placed into without willing it. Power isn't something that simply gets used against us. Power is something that we all have, as individuals and most importantly as groups. For example, there's no reason we can't form roving gangs that travel around and teach permaculture, medical, and post-civilization organization the survivors instead.

There's no reason we can't organize with our neighbors, pool what resources we're willing to share, and begin immediately to grow food, develop a shared culture, and defend ourselves against the people who try to take it away from us.

And who knows? Maybe industrial civilization will collapse before we hit chain-reaction levels of carbon release. Maybe peak oil will save us from obliterating most all life on earth. Or maybe enough people will wisen up and begin to actively dismantle the industrial civilization that is killing us as surely as an axe might. What then?

Two things: rewilding and community rescue.

## **Rewilding**

Rewilding is the process of turning what is domesticated back into something that is wild. The first thing, the very first thing that honestly we should be doing right now, regardless of law, is tearing up pavement and helping the forest return. Some road infrastructure might come in handy, of course, but there is plenty of space that quite obviously—to the post-civilized—would be better left feral. And every road carved through the forest in essence cuts the forest into two distinct areas. This is most easily observed by getting out of your car and walking a few meters into the trees; only the outside of a healthy forest is a tangled thicket. The inside is quite roomy.

Nature will reclaim territory at its own pace, but in some areas it makes sense to help it along. Desertification is real and it's scary and it's something that humanity has been doing for millennia before the industrial revolution. Even with careful replanting, tree farms often last only a few cycles before the soil is too depleted to sustain life. The more that science learns about forest ecology, the more we learn that we're better off leaving forests to fend for themselves.

I would argue, and I'm not alone, that global reforestation at a rapid pace is one of the only chances we have of preventing our climate from going completely out control. But mostly, we need to let the wilderness encroach back towards us for its own sake. Anthropocentric ideas—that is, ideas that take humanity and its "needs" as an absolute pri-



ority—are another of the many elements that led us down this foolish road we've called civilization.

It's astounding, this haughtiness that has allowed humanity to see nature as so inconsequential that we permit coal companies to literally level entire mountain ranges (see mountaintop removal coal-mining in the Appalachian mountains). The fact that we don't rise in anger against such monstrous acts shows just how domesticated, how tame we've become.

As much as we need to rewild huge tracts of the earth, we need to rewild most everything within ourselves.

### **Community Rescue**

After the collapse, much of the infrastructure of our global society will of course have fallen. And those in power will try their hardest to stay in power. But if we organize for ourselves and our communities, the existing governmental and corporate structures may be simply rendered obsolete.

Humans, by nature (yes, yes, we can argue forever about what is and isn't human nature, but this is my column) work together in times of crisis. When things go wrong, the status quo of isolation is suspended. This is easily observed by waiting for the bus: you stand and wait and no one speaks with anyone else. But as soon as the bus is ten minutes late, everyone is friends.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, people organized collectively to loot food. The government showed up a few days later and started shooting people. And the bureaucratic aid organizations were so bloated and inefficient that some members of the National Guard, their humanity showing through their uniform, smuggled supplies to the anarchist Common Ground Collective. They did it because they knew that the anarchists would actually get medicine to where it was needed.

People always talk about how without the government we'd all just kill one another, but most often the only killing that happens in a crisis is done by the government as it aims to maintain law and order, the civilized status quo, at all costs. (The next bogeyman strawman that anti-anarchists

will pull out is Somalia, but Somalia doesn't lack for governments; it's full of warlords.)

So our role is simply to help these organic communities foster, the same as we might help forests retake Walmart parking lots. We need to organize in our local areas to meet people's needs: food, water, shelter, medical care, and culture. And we'll need to fight against the remnants of civilization as it tries to reassert its might.

Most survival guides focus on the nuts and bolts of individual survival: how to filter your water, how to store food, how to construct shelters out of whatever one might find. These books are useful, and it's worth keeping a few around.

A lot of my friends keep what some people call "oh shit gear," or OSG for short. Water purification systems, canned food, topographic maps of the area. Medical kits, with an emphasis on antibiotics and any prescription medicines one might need. Spare eyeglasses. Gas masks and air filters. Protective clothing. These things are worth having around.

At least one group, the Aftershock Action Alliance of New York City, is doing community, grassroots disaster preparedness. They work with their neighbors to develop plans of how the neighborhood can work together to survive catastrophe. They teach workshops on community rescue.

It's only on the social scale that we can defend ourselves from famine, illness, and warlords. And it's there that we need to focus.



## THE CITY THAT'S NOT A CITY

What do you call a city that's not a city?

No idea.

But the label isn't really what matters. What does a city that's not a city look like? That's where it gets interesting.

The settlement of cities is one of the primary traits that distinguishes a civilization from other forms of societal structuring, like a band or a tribe. And if we're looking to move past civilization (which is the core theme of my column), we'd better take a closer look at cities themselves.

My dictionary told me that a city is a large town. That didn't do me much good, so I turned to town: "an urban area that has a name, defined boundaries, and local government...." And immediately, a lot of the problems with cities are apparent.

Government is an easy one for me to dismiss: I'm an anarchist. I don't believe in "the State" or what is traditionally construed as government. I don't like the idea of one central body that makes all the decisions. And I don't like being told that all

I get to do is pick the person who makes the decisions for me. I'm much more interested in community and individual self-governance. There's that old cliché: democracy is two sheep and three wolves deciding what to have for dinner. Well, at least that's a cliché in the circles I run in.

There's a lot of information out there, if you're curious, about anarchism and horizontalism and ideas like that, so I won't get too into that stuff here.

My second problem with the city, as defined by my computer's *New Oxford American Dictionary*, is its "defined boundaries." Defined boundaries are, if you ask me, one of the most emblematic pathologies of civilization. A mountain range doesn't have a defined boundary, it has foothills. A storm doesn't have a defined boundary. And neither does my gender.

Labels can be useful as descriptors, but it's a pretty crap idea to define oneself or one's environs into "defined boundaries." Besides being essentially untrue (boundaries are always more permeable or outright illusory than we give them credit for), they lead to all sorts of horrors, like nationalism. For example: I'm a vegan. I don't feel *defined* by this, but it's the most convenient way to describe the way I eat. I don't have any nationalistic feelings about veganism. I don't care what you eat, not really. I just hate animal agriculture and want to have nothing to do with it.

So cities have governments and defined boundaries. Count me out.

Anti-civilization theorist Derrick Jensen chose to define cities (and I paraphrase) as people living in such density as to require the routine importation of resources. His problem with this is that when a society requires the routine importation of resources, trade is well and good until there's a shortage and the other group doesn't want to trade. Then you've got war.

I'll throw this third element in as what we ought not let our urban areas continue to be.

But we can't abandon urbanization. It would be utterly ecocidal. The human population of the earth being what it is, we need most people living in high densities so that we can minimize the footprint of each individual.

And honestly, I *like* living in the city. Well, I like living in lots of cities, but that's because I'm nomadic. I also love the wilds, but if I want the wilds to exist, I know that I need the cities to exist too.

Cities have long been a locus of the multiculturalism that makes our world so interesting. They're where ideas and peoples foment and intersect.

Now, to be honest, I don't really have a problem with continuing to just call urban areas "cities" and just change what we mean when we say that word. It could be argued that the same could be said of "civilization," actually, and just change what it means to be "civilized," but my personal opinion is that the word civilization is just too drenched in blood to salvage. And why do we need a word to represent "the society that is considered most advanced"? I'm not so interested in this whole "linear progress" thing. But I digress.

### **The Non-City**

So if we don't want government, defined borders, or the routine importation of resource (all features of most cities up to this point in time), let's just ditch those things and figure out something more interesting, useful, and liberatory.

The more I learn about tribes, as distinguished from bands or civilizations, the more the system appeals to me. I used to think that a tribe was sort of an enlarged family unit, a homogenous group that one was born into and only escaped perhaps through marriage or isolation. Turns out I was probably wrong.

As near as I can figure my anthropology, tribes are heterogenous with fluid boundaries. People and ideas move between tribes in ways that nation states would never allow.

The way I like to see a city without its government or boundaries is a geography shared by a large number of overlapping tribes (or cultures, if you will).

And this is largely what cities have always been, right beneath the veneer of homogeny that the government encourages in the populace. Cities change drastically, block to block, building to building, even room to room! My experience of New York City (or Amsterdam, or anywhere I've

lived) is a totally different experience than someone else who walk the same streets but hangs with a different crowd. Besides some shared resources, like the subway, we might as well be in different cities.

There are a number of alternatives to top-down government that have been proposed (and often tested to good results, though unfortunately the State has a tendency to reimpose itself by force). I personally like the idea of a federation of the tribes (or cliques, or cultures, or, hell, trade-unions if you're into that sort of thing) that comes together to make the decisions that affect the whole of the urbanized population.

Some folks have asked me what decentralization on such a scale would mean for specialized trades that depend on such a complex web of industry, like space exploration. My suggestion is that everyone is going to have different priorities. The people who want to be involved in space travel can be involved in space travel. If enough gardeners and the like want to support the degree of deep specialization involved in a field, they would be free to do so.

Personally, I think that anyone interested in space exploration has a long way to go to prove that such a program can ever be ecologically sustainable, but I don't put it past people to figure out a way how at some point. One fiction book, in fact, discusses this very thing: in *My Journey With Aristotle To The Anarchist Utopia* by Graham Purchase, we are introduced to our bioregionalist, trade-federated space pioneers working on bioplastic satellites. Wingnutter? Of course. All the most interesting ideas are.

## **Sustainability**

The profit motive, capitalism, needs to be replaced with a sustainability motive. I challenge anyone who's now thinking "nurr... capitalism and profit and selfishness are a biologically-predetermined part of human nature" to go out and read some anthropology and biology before reading the rest of this magazine. Pay particular note to how the study of cooperation as an evolutionary impulse is given increased credence in biology today.

Now, sustainability *is* a biologically-predetermined priority for us as humans. That is to say, the survival of ourselves and our species is dependent on reaching a balance with our environment. It really is do or die.

Finding sustainability within urban areas is a particular challenge, but one that is already being met by the agricultural pioneers of vertical farming, hydroponics, and permacultured systems. It's been argued that agriculture (well, monoculture, really) is what got us humans into this civilization nonsense in the first place, but these more thought-out techniques might save us from much of the horrors of mass-scale farming.

Can we grow enough food in urban environments to avoid the routine importation of resources? Sure, why not? We have rooftops and we've got floor after floor of sunny rooms in skyscrapers. We have an unfathomable amount of vertical space as well.

The vegetables and fruits will be easy. The cereals and proteins will be more difficult, but certainly not beyond us to figure out.

Much of what it takes to be sustainable is actually made easier by human density: rather than setting up every small household with its own compost (for food and human waste both, although of course shit needs its own treatment), every apartment building can pool its resources. Well-designed (or organically designed, for that matter) urban areas don't require individuals to have cars. Most of the city is within walking distance, and there can always be public transportation.

## **The Urban Wild**

The city can be as wild a place as the forest. Buildings come and go as their use demands, outside of central planning. Organic growth and decay all take place, and biodiversity is actually quite high in large city. The city, or non-city or whatever, can easily be the home of the rewilded humans, the post-civilized.

FOR SCIENCE TO  
LIVE, CIVILIZATION  
MUST DIE





I would argue (mostly for fun, I admit: there isn't too much of a point in strongly holding one's own definitions of words over the definitions that others use) that civilization can be described by its linear thinking. (To refer back to my dictionary, civilization is "the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced."—"Most advanced" strikes me as pretty linear thinking.)

Science is always equated with civilization, but I'd love to see the two concepts divorced. Science is a system with which to explore the natural laws of our world, to develop technologies with. And yet science has been held at the mercy of civilization. Civilization refuses to go back. It encourages us only to push forward, it argues that anything newly developed is more worthwhile than what came before. It does not let us question our fundamentals.

And the world is in dire peril. We need to question our fundamentals. We need to question why certain technologies prevailed and others languished in obscurity. It doesn't necessarily reflect an innate superiority of the technology that won. The internal combustion engine won out over the electric engine over a hundred years ago not because it was objectively "better," but because it was better suited for warfare. The fixed-wing aircraft is the same story. Most of the "fatal flaws" of airships are easily conquered by modern science, but our society has the damndest time pondering a reversion to "antiquated" technology, despite the amazing green-travel potential offered by lighter-than-air craft.

Capitalism has, of course, poisoned research motivation utterly. Technologies are not developed so as to be appropriate to a natural world (or even for their aesthetic values, which I would consider worthwhile and enriching as well), but instead to maximize profit. Even setting ethics aside, this makes for a profoundly uninteresting culture.

I call upon you to unfetter the sciences from the chains of the civilized world. Let us instead be free. Free to close the cycle of life and free to float above the world drinking cognac in our dirigibles.





FOR SCIENCE TO LIVE,  
CIVILIZATION MUST DIE

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