Future Primitives

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'Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man?'
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*[1]

'It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.'
Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*[2]

Abstract
This article presents two typical but inadequate responses to the philosophical problem of constructing an environmental identity and ethic for our climate-impacted future. It finds difficulties with a primitivist mentality that renounces technology in favour of a nostalgic view of the human past, then critiques the opposite position that puts full faith in capitalistic technology in order to avoid shedding our consumer culture and economic commitment to unlimited growth. Finally, an alternative is presented as the 'future primitive' which points to an identity which befits the difficult years ahead as well as the hope for a sustainable future. The essay considers common texts from the anarcho-primitivist writings of John Zerzan as well as the techno-futurist tradition of various kinds of eco-modernist environmentalism. In short, a sustainable future will not be populated by the identity fostered in advanced capitalistic economies, but also briefly offers a model in the prescient figure of the American environmentalist Henry David Thoreau.

Keywords: climate change, primitivism, environmental ethics, techno-futurism, eco-modernism, Henry David Thoreau, false dilemma fallacy, future primitives

Introduction

Climate change and our trepidation for an uncertain but frightening future brings forward all our practices for review and modification. But also, it brings forward our very self-conception as hu-

1 Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden,' In *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New York: Penguin, 2012), 207.
2 Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.

mans. Whatever human life will be like in the future, it surely will not resemble the social patterns that produce these emission levels. Correspondingly, whatever self-conceptions humans will have, they are unlikely to be the consumer identities that ground the global culture today. In this essay, I want to further discuss about human life in the not-so-distant future and point out a common pattern of false dichotomies that pepper some of the literature. Avoiding these false dichotomies, I hope to advance a simple but sustainably based model of human life and identity according to the trope 'future primitives', a term that has been around with various permutations since the 1960s.[3]
False dichotomies, or false dilemmas, offer an unduly restricted range of choices that mislead us into unnecessarily narrowing our available options. 'False Dichotomy' refers to an informal fallacy that has a valid argumentative form – either A or B, not A, therefore B – but unnecessarily restricts the range of options in the first premise. The dichotomy is false because instead of being limited to 'A or B' we recognise 'A or B or C or D, etc.' As we move forward with solutions to climate change, we are frequently met with such a restricted range of options. On one hand, we meet with those who emphasise a severe restriction of emissions by a rejection of the technological culture that reinforces these emissions. The 'primitives' hope to achieve sustainability by undercutting the technological thrust of civilisation that brought us to this precipitous moment. On the other hand, the 'techno futurists' hope to achieve sustainability through an expansion and redirection of the technological culture that produced these unforeseen problems. These debates are complicated by background attitudes and positions on technology, capitalism, and the very nature of civilisation. While these are difficult and problematic issues, they are also likely unavoidable and come with further sets of false dichotomies that muddle the issues. In this paper, I would like to explore them to a degree sufficient to find each of these alternatives to be profoundly flawed, and to offer an unpleasant alternative that combines the least alluring features of each, but which seem to be required to morally navigate the most successful and sustainable future for humans and all other species. As such, I will examine each alternative in turn before offering the neglected possibility.

Bias and Civilisation: The False Dichotomies

Much has changed in our understanding of primitive peoples through anthropological investigations in the last half-century, but older conceptions linger in popular debate. I use the term 'civilisation' vaguely to refer to the different forms of hierarchical society that has followed settled agriculture and contrast it to the more mobile societies of the pastoralists and foragers – more 'primitive' in the sense that all human life was originally organised this way. In several keyways, civilisation has been defined and justified by a self-promoting interpretation over against primitive peoples. Variously referred to as primitives, savages, hunter-gatherers or foragers, they have functioned as a limit to the boundaries of civilisation's self-understanding. The idea of a foraging society does not really become explicit in European thought prior to the 1740s. However, prior characterisations of the 'natural man' versus the 'civilised man' allowed European thinkers a handy contrast for their purposes of justifying ideas of progress or the necessity of various types of governments. The most famous, or notorious, of such characterisations was that of Thomas Hobbes who portrayed the natural state as one of almost constant labour and anxiety. Hobbes characterises pre-civilised life as a constant struggle for limited resources which inevitably leads to violent

3 As far as I can determine, this term originated in the literature in a California journal *Planet Drum*, volume 3 from 1974. The very brief article 'Future Primitive' by Jeremiah Gorsline and Freeman House gestured toward a local movement for an environmentally conscious future. Curiously, the seventh track on the 1972 album *Caravanserai* by the rock band Santana is an instrumental entitled 'Future Primitive'. There are likely prior references.

conflict. Without a powerful enforcer to cow our inherently selfish and unlimited desires, we are engaged in a continual state of war:

> Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such conditions there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.[4]

The key features here are: (1) Hobbes's reduction of pre-civilised life to bestial terms, (2) his characterisation of that life as the antithesis of all that is *hoped for*[5] in civilised life, (3) a characterisation of non-civilised life as necessarily involving insufficient resources, and (4) his view that it is constant warfare.[6] It is not important whether Hobbes thought that the state of nature was ever a historical reality. Relative to our own conception of pre-history, there is almost no comparison to Hobbes's likely belief that the world was only several thousand years old. However, it is instructive to draw from field data and anthropological studies of foraging societies in order to belie the ingrained misconceptions. As far as the first point, it is a key move to identify the human species with its manifestation in civilisation – or, in less charitable terms – in its domesticated state. A hallmark of civilisation's characterisation of ancient foragers is to render them hairy, bestial knuckle-draggers with a strong tendency toward violence.[7] To call someone a cave-man or a Neanderthal is always a pejorative. However, it is good to keep in mind the simple tenets of our current anthropological beliefs – humans existed for several hundred thousand years as a successful species prior to the very recent manifestation of civilisation after settled agriculture which is only 5 to 12 thousand years old. If we trace back to the entire hominid line, we have several million years of successful life on earth. Rather than identifying pre-civilised *homo sapiens* with animals, pre-civilised ancient foragers are the more accurate and proper model of the species whereas our current manifestation in civilised life is a deviation.[8] Just as Hobbes projected the ills in his own times onto the state of nature, we also hold a similar common assumption: that pre-civilised life was a continual struggle for limited resources. A moment to pause and reflect that such a meager and scavenging existence was unlikely to have supported the species for such an incredibly long stretch of time might be enough to allay that misconception. But to add insult to the misconception's injury, some recent anthropological data estimates that most adult

4 Thomas Hobbes, 'Leviathan', In (1651) Part I, Chapter 13, section 9, in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, 8th ed., ed. Stephen Cahn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 578.

5 I characterise Hobbes as drawing the contrast to what is *hoped for* in civilised life rather than *the fact* of civilised life. It may or may not have occurred to Hobbes that the evils of civil war and social disorder that he experienced were themselves the products of civilised life rather than the absence of it.

6 I leave out many features of Hobbes's account such as his odd individualism, etc.

7 Identification and characterisation of Neanderthals has been particularly instructive on this point. For instance, see Ian Tattersall, *The Last Neanderthal: the Rise, Success and Mysterious Extinction of our Nearest Relatives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), or Erik Trinkaus and Pat Shipman, *The Neandertals: Changing the Image of Mankind* (New York: Knopf, 1993). In the last few years, since genetic analyses have located Neanderthal genes in contemporary Homo Sapiens as a commonality – especially among those with Euro-ancestry – and thus inferred various episodes of interbreeding, the corresponding imagery of Neanderthal's has become progressively Homo Sapien-ised.

8 Certainly temporally, as in the comment by John Parkington, et al., that 'Depending on how human origin is defined, human prehistory thus covers all but a small fraction (95–99.7%) of the duration of human existence.' See, John Parkington, et al. 'Prehistoric Populations', In *Encyclopedia of Population*, eds. Paul Demeny and Geoffrey McNichol, Vol. 2. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 789.

members of foraging societies 'work' an average of 14 hours per week.[9] This data didn't even factor in children and the elderly who do not really forage at all. However we balance the numbers with further data, it's a sobering contrast as we plod and commute through our ever-increasing work weeks.[10] The main contribution of the article was correcting our biased characterisation of forager societies – and thus by inference the state of Homo Sapiens prior to widespread civilisation – and that this form of social life can and did meet needs and satisfactions.

It is certainly the case that foraging bands live quite differently than the typical lives of those in civilisation. Being non-literate and retaining only the simple technologies that can be abandoned and acquired easily, their lives take on a degree of simplicity that is hard for us to imagine. Yet their lives were highly successful in that they consistently acquired the resources they needed, were able to maintain and increase their population and secure a lifestyle that they could pass onto their descendants. The relatively small numbers of humans[11] lessened anthropogenic impact on the environment[12] thus ensuring available foods for an indefinite future. The important point is to correct our lingering false conception that primitive life was necessarily a struggle with starvation and somehow less than human. This false view of pre-civilised life is a condition for a false dichotomy for it deflects attention from simpler forms of human organisation and limits our awareness of the wide range of models of living and identity. *Either* you can be fully human and thus 'civilised' *or* you are some kind of degraded being suffering starvation and disease. It is not surprising that philosophers – and the intellectual class in general – promoted this early form of false dichotomy and defined humans outside of civilisation as degraded, for the social conditions of the intellectual class are tied to our leisure status within the class system of civilisation. To define the human as only realised in that same system is certainly self-serving, and seems to have also required a reinterpretation of human origins as a mere preparation leading up to hierarchical civilisation.[13] A fresh reappraisal of primitive life can loosen us from the grip of this false dichotomy, but it might also offer alternatives to contemporary consumer identity.

9 The *locus classicus* of this literature is Marshall Sahlens's 'The Original Affluent Society' reprinted countless times. The version used here is from *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means*, edited by John Gowdy (Washington DC: Island Press, 1998), 5-41. Although a sample of sources are utilised, much of the data comes from the !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert. Sahlens's idea was originally presented in 1966 and published in different forms in the years following his presentation. A critical but ultimately supporting viewpoint about this work can be found in Nurit Bird-David's 'Beyond 'The Original Affluent Society': A Culturalist Reformulation' *Current Anthropology* Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb., 1992), 25-47. The article includes multiple commenters also critically discussing the canonical status of Sahlens's article.

10 In this section I have focused on Hobbes but there are numerous such accounts across the centuries. For instance, Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet's great paean to progress *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) trans. June Barraclough, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955). Condorcet notes that '[In this natural state] the uncertainty of life, the difficulty man experiences in providing for his needs, and the necessary cycle of extreme activity and total idleness do not allow him the leisure in which he can indulge in thought and enrich his understanding with new combinations of ideas.' (p. 5) Condorcet goes so far as to identify the appearance of leisure with the higher class of a hierarchical society in which the labour of the lower classes frees up the time and energy of this 'class of men whose time is not wholly taken up in manual labour and whose desires extend beyond their elementary needs.' (p. 6) Closer to our own time, the anthropologist Melville Herkovits notes that 'The aboriginal Australians are a classic example of a people whose economic resources are of the scantiest. In many places their habitat is even more severe than the Bushmen, although this perhaps not quite true in the northern portion […] A tabulation of the foodstuffs which the aborigines of the northwest central Queensland extract from the country they inhabit is instructive …The variety in this list is impressive, but we must not be deceived into thinking that variety indicates plenty, for the available quantities of each element in it are so slight that only the most intense application makes survival possible' *Economic Anthropology* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

11 While numbers are hard to gauge without hard data, the current consensus estimate of world population prior to civilisation's deployment of settled agriculture is very roughly about 4 million people. See, et al. Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (New York: Puffin, 1978).

12 Humans have always had an impact on the environment, but the relatively small population lessened the consequences of that impact. Some current research conjectures on the impact of pre-civilised humans on climate change and whether they produced enough CO2 emissions to warm the atmosphere to the point of eliminating a glacial period that could have been occurring now. See William Ruddiman, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

13 Maybe the clearest version of this is found in Aristotle's *Politics*, especially Book I, chapters 1-2, 1252a-1253b, e.g., in J.L Ackrill, *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 507-510.

First Contrary of the False Alternative: Past Primitives

The self-importance of the ruling and intellectual classes may also skew the deeper causes of civilisation's problems. According to some sources, agricultural stress from overpopulation led to deforestation and its consequences as an endemic source weakening and eventually leading to the collapses of ancient civilisations.[14] Just as our understanding of ancient Greece is molded by the Homeric epics and the works of the ruling and intellectual class in ancient Athens, there is a disincentive to explore the potentially inherent problems of civilisation within the very leisure class whose existence depends on the continual reliance and depletion of a limited environment. This is especially true if there is really no going back to the old way of the foragers.[15] Thus the intellectual and ruling class has a built-in motivation to avoid the harsh reality that undergirds their rule, especially if they suspect that such a natural depletion will only doom them in the long run. The myth of *growth and increase* as the key indicators of success and progress would have contributed to the inability to come to terms with the data. It suggests another false dichotomy as well: either the past was a golden age or the golden age will come through growth and increase. But the key focus of the present study is a further feature: *the inability to discover oneself in a self-image outside of civilisation*.

'Primitivism' is not just a descriptive term for simple societies; it is also an ancient ethical position and has been proposed as a solution to various problems of human living. Epicurus offered it as a way to a life of tranquility, Buddha to nirvana. St. Francis offered it as a way of communion with nature and the divine, Rousseau as an avenue out of corruption and back to our original state. These ethical positions mostly focused on attaining or preserving a sense of flourishing or well-being – variously conceived – that constituted an option for a segment of the world. While many could offer this as a general way, it was realistically presented to a select group conceived over against the wider trends of the civilisation. On the other hand, contemporary primitivists tend to also engage in a struggle against the forces that continuously harm and thus do injustice to all the earth's inhabitants. They do so with an analysis of contemporary society from a moral point of view, but also as a far-reaching critique of the underlying causes of harm that has roots in the nature of civilisation. Some authors are so taken by the primitivist style that they look to it for a solution to all the problems of contemporary society. And in recent years, more prominence has been given to the voices of those who critique civilisation itself. In similar fashion, they begin with the overwhelming problems of our technological culture. And they trace the source of the problem not simply back to the industrial revolution, but to the origins of civilisation in settled agriculture and the development of a hierarchical society. This recent genre of primitivist writers has generally grown out of the environmentalist movement, but some writers also have roots in the anarchist movement.

Such an extended attack on the dysfunction of civilisation is found across the writings of John Zerzan.[16] His writings crystalise all these negative positions and, drawing on environmental,

14 Clive Ponting, *A New Green History of the World: the Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*, Revised Edit. (New York: Penguin, 2007), 1-86.

15 By some accounts, knowledge required for successful foraging is lost within one generation of the shift towards settled agriculture. For a more recent study, see Gary Paul Nabhan and Sara St. Antoine, 'The Loss of Floral and Faunal Story: The Extinction of Experience,' In *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, eds., Stephen R. Keller and Edward O. Wilson, (Washington DC: Island Press, 1993), 229-250.

16 Zerzan was born in 1943 and was ABD at USC in History when he left the programme. He has not held academic positions and his publications are all from non-academic sources, typically in anarchist venues. As such, Zerzan rejects property laws and publishes his works with an 'anti-copyright' disclaimer; e.g., 'This book may be freely pirated and quoted. The author and publishers, however, would like to be informed at: …' *Future Primitives*, title page. Zerzan gained fame, or notoriety, as a correspondent with the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, and for lending theoretical support for the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle.

anarchist, and primitivist traditions, looks for the solution to the problem of civilisation in the 'future primitive.' An interesting feature is that he does not simply argue his point abstractly, but also attempts to enact a change in lifestyle and a clear rejection of the current self-image of the human being in favour of a new self-conception. Zerzan labels himself and others as 'future primitives' and the ambiguity of the term is helpful. It could refer to the writer and his community in the near future.[17] Clearly, they are not members of a traditional foraging society. They have grown up within civilisation, but the attempt to shed the self-image of either the human as consumer or the human as civilised within some niche of a hierarchical society leads them to creative attempts to remake themselves. It may also refer to distant forms of human life that could be envisioned in centuries to come, perhaps after the collapse of civilisation in a post-apocalyptic world. But my interest is primarily in the ability to fashion a self-image of the human being outside of civilisation and one that might suggest some way to live that out.

In order to fashion an ideal of life, Zerzan plumbs through the anthropological literature on primitive societies and constructs the negation of the civilised person through a process of subtraction. As Zerzan notes,

> Life before or outside civilization is now defined more specifically as social existence prior to domestication of animals and plants. Mounting evidence demonstrates that before the Neolithic shift from a foraging or gatherer-hunter mode of existence to an agricultural lifeway, most people had ample free time, considerable gender autonomy or equality, an ethos of egalitarianism and sharing, and no organized violence.[18]

Zerzan builds a model of what he desires to overcome in contemporary society, then roots around for echoes of that in the anthropological literature about ancient and contemporary primitive peoples. We are overworked, but primitives live in greater leisure.[19] We are locked into narrow specialisations, but primitives share a common socially undivided life.[20] We are violent, but primitives were less prone to systematic violence.[21] We have intractable inequalities, but primitives lived as more egalitarian.[22] We suffer from chronic mental and physical diseases, but there is evidence that this is rare among simple societies.[23] In short, our problems are endemic to civilisation and the solution is to be found in the human being that flourished prior to the Neolithic transformation. Further, and maybe the most extreme claim Zerzan makes, the very languages we use – both in written and in spoken terms – have divorced us from the environment that shelters us and rendered the natural world into an object to be exploited rather than simply a home of embedded relations for a co-existing creature.[24] As he sums it up in *Future Primitives*,

17 Zerzan himself lives in a modest house in Eugene, Oregon and draws social security. The palpable sense of compromise with a society one is in rebellion against gives his visions of primitivism a sense of idealised desire. See the article by Zander Sherman, 'Anarchy in the USA: Four Years after Occupy Wall Street, Meet the Man Who's Been Quietly Fanning the Flames of the Country's Most Important Insurrectionary Movements', *The Believer*, Vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2015 http://www.believermag.com/issues/201511/.

18 John Zerzan, *Twilight of the Machines* (Port Townsend WA: Feral House, 2008), 107.

19 John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (Colombia, MO: Autononmedia, Anti-copyright, 1994), 30-31.

20 Zerzan, *Twilight of the Machines*, Preface, vii.

21 Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 36, 42-44 – no headhunting until farming, 19 – less territorial, *Twilight of the Machines*, 19-26, 48 – 'Headhunting, cannibalism, slavery, war all appear only with the onset of agriculture.'

22 Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 34-35 – anarchy as autonomy, 36-37 – lowered ritual life and thus division of labour leads to greater egalitarianism, 38-39 – without ritual, there are no strong gender divisions, 16-17 – this includes no strong gender division between hunters and gatherers, *Twilight of the Machines*, 11-18 gives a general summation of the position.

23 John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* 2nd, Rev. Edit. (Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press/Paleo Editions, Anti-copyright 1999), 82-83, 87, which includes the better nutrition of primitives, *Future Primitives*, l32-33 and the next essay in Part I entitled 'The Mass Psychology of Misery.'

24 Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal*, 15-43; *Future Primitives*, 27 – on symbolic culture as domination, *Twilight of the Machines*, 3-10.

> To 'define' a disalienated world would be impossible and even undesirable, but I think we can and should try to reveal the unworld of today and how it got this way. We have taken a monstrously wrong turn with symbolic culture and division of labor, from a place of enchantment, understanding and wholeness to the absence we find at the heart of the doctrine of progress. Empty and emptying, the logic of domestication with its demand to control everything now shows us the ruin of the civilization that ruins the rest. Assuming the inferiority of nature enables the domination of cultural systems that soon will make the very earth uninhabitable.[25]

The palpable despair that runs through Zerzan's writings is part of the attraction of his thought, and logically only this could lead to a wholesale rejection of civilisation and the sole viable solution to its pathological destructiveness in the recovery of the simple and peaceful lives of primitive peoples. We have lost our way on the earth and primitivism is 'finding our way back home.'[26]
It might help to assess some of the claims Zerzan makes on his laundry list of key issues so that we have some rough gauge of these issues regarding civilisation and primitive societies. For instance, it does appear that band societies generally have exhibited greater gender equality, and the sharing cultures hold to a greater egalitarianism.[27] Not having property, of course, limits inequality. And I take it as an open question whether the type of debilitating psychological problems we find on the increase in contemporary society do not have roots in our retreat from the natural world for a lifetime of navigating complex social structures.[28] But one of the key claims that Zerzan makes is that civilisation is responsible for increasing violence and that primitive life in pre-civilised times was more peaceful and non-aggressive. Unfortunately, much recent research has gone the other way and proposed that violence, and violent death from other humans, was not so uncommon. Lawrence Keeley's *War Before Civilization* establishes significant evidence from an archeological perspective that fortifications and skeletal remains show endemic violence in most pre-civilised societies.[29] Steven LeBlanc argues in *Constant Battles* that humans never lived in ecological balance and argues that violence and warfare are perennial rational responses provoked by crises of necessary resources.[30] Rather than supposing an Edenic pre-history, it seems that primitive peoples had their own stresses and difficulties.[31] So, while we can correct the bias of our outmoded view that pre-civilised life was a constant struggle with starvation and suffering, we need not infer that it was a state of grace either.
In an anarcho-primitivist conception, the process of overcoming the alienation of civilisation is similar to a process of healing a wound and returning to health. However, what connects and identifies us now is our loss. For Zerzan, 'Even the likelihood of a collapse of the global techno-structure should not lure us away from the acknowledgement of our decisive potential roles' for 'we are all wounded, and paradoxically, this estrangement becomes the basis for communality.

25 Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 45-46.
26 This is the title of the last chapter of *Twilight of the Machines*, 123.
27 See, inter alia, Patricia Draper, '!Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts,' in *Toward and Anthropology of Women*, ed. R.R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 77-109; Karen Endicott, 'Gender relations in hunter-gatherer societies', in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers,* ed. R.B. Lee and R. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 411–418.
28 Notice also the difference between social patterns in agricultural civilisations, industrial civilisations, and in our globalised consumer culture. Zerzan tends to lump all of these into a single notion of civilisations but expressed with greater intensity and frequency. But this is not established in any way. It is largely anecdotal.
29 Lawrence, W. Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
30 Steven L. LeBlanc & Katherine Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).
31 I should add that neither Keeley nor LeBlanc infer that violence is somehow a part of human nature. They only argue that there is evidence for persistent violence in the archeological record and that it appears to spike during periods of resource depletion.

A gathering of the traumatized may be forming, a spiritual kinship demanding recovery.'[32] An attempt to recover a pre-civilised life from humans trained from birth to internalise civilisation's rules is likely to be a mere groping, but the attempt has been labeled in provocative ways that provides some interest. In *Future Primitive*, Zerzan uses the term 'feral' to describe the state of being primitive again after shedding civilisation's outer and inner conditions.[33] But he has very little to say about how that is done. To be feral is the opposite of being domesticated and controlled, and clearly the attraction of primitive life for those in civilisation is the sense of being free from being domesticated and controlled. Thus, wondering about being feral is recognition of the absence of a kind of power one might have had if one were to have been alive many millennia ago. And for Zerzan, 'future primitives' always seems to be a term that essentially reverts back to the past.[34] Maybe it's apparent that this ideal presents its own form of alienation. On Zerzan's account, I am alienated from my authentic desires because of civilisation domestication of my spontaneous nature, but I am also alienated from the ideal of the feral primitive not only in culture and practice but in time. In Zerzan's writings, at least, there is little to 'feral' other than the negation of what-we-are-now, and this is problematic for his notion of 'primitive' and explains why he is so focused on the past and a pre-historical model of primitivism. Both of these approaches block discussion of what might count as viable pragmatic actions toward living as a future primitive now and in the near future, which is, I suppose, the point of building the model. This constitutes another form of the false dichotomy as it vacillates between two alternatives and attempts to drive us into the feral primitive by simply negating our current status in civilisation. But the ideal is not fleshed out and the vast majority of us would simply stick with our current status. While this offer to generate a new self-image of a human being as a future primitive seemed promising, it fails to deliver the promise because it is really advocating being a *past primitive*.

In terms of developing our self-image as sustainable human beings, the issue of language and symbolic culture is, if you will excuse the expression, symbolic of the problem. Zerzan has so rejected the state of humanity *as we are* that he has glorified a version of human existence without language, symbolic culture, ritual, and rationality that is not actually a version *ourselves* at all but that of another type of human that is only ancestrally related to us. It *may* well be that language and rationality are constitutive elements in human domination of nature and of internalised and externalised social control. However, the elimination of these features is really the erasure of any identity proper to Homo sapiens. A pre-symbolic, proto-linguistic mind seems more appropriate for other species of hominins, from Homo habilis through Homo neandertalensis.[35] One may even wonder whether this desire for pre-symbolic primitivism is less an exploration of prehistory and more an indulgence of nostalgia for childhood. In any event it is not us, and this is instructive in our attempts to avoid the false alternatives fallacy that seems to oscillate between what-we-are-now and what-we-were-prehistory. Hobbes and Zerzan utilise the same set of false alternatives but lionise and demonise each other's contraries.

Further, this version of primitivism is in important ways an escape fantasy from the problems of civilisation. We do have real problems with contemporary global life, and the matter of global warming and the effects of anthropogenic climate change require sophisticated analysis, and likely

32 Zerzan, *Twilight of the Machines*, 117.

33 Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 144, 146.

34 Zerzan clearly accepts the notion of a golden age, and the feral primitive is a return to that.

35 Some instructive accounts at modeling what different groups of hominins might have thought like are given by Frederick L. Coolidge and Thomas Wynn in their very accessible books, *The Rise of Homo sapiens: The Evolution of Modern Thinking* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and *How to Think Like a Neandertal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). They utilised a combination of archeological and neuropsychological evidence to articulate differences that help a lay reader grasp key capacities/limitations in the record of human pre-history.

a greater form of internalised and externalised social control. We need solutions for our pressing environmental problems that develop practical strategies to get results. And so we need a corresponding sense of self-identity in which we can locate ourselves in the problem, in the solution, and in the steps that lead from one to the other. I will argue that some variant of primitivism will be a part of that requirement, but it cannot be a past primitivism, it must be a future primitivism and it must be one that does not deny our history and our present but carries us forward with a sense of scientific and technological sophistication. It is precisely along these lines that many of the futurist-oriented thinkers who glory in our technological savvy have proposed a way out of our contemporary problems.

Second Contrary of the False Alternative: The Techno-Futurists

At the other end of the spectrum from the radical retraction of modern technologies, a growing number of environmentalists have advocated the very opposite – abandonment of traditional philosophical re-conceptions of identity and moral theory in favour of a practical orientation to environmental problems that focuses on political compromise and technological solutions. An explicit advocate against traditional environmentalism and in favour of 'eco-pragmatism' is Andrew Light, who has a foot in both worlds as a philosophy professor and a consultant in international climate change negotiations. Following in the pragmatist tradition of John Dewey, Light seeks a reformation of philosophy away from 'conversation that occurs mostly among philosophers, directed primarily toward other environmental philosophers and our students.'[36] This typically, though not necessarily, refers to philosophers who focus on questions of the intrinsic value of nature and often involve a non-anthropocentric point of view. Instead, Light advocates that philosophers focus on policy matters and assume an anthropocentric position to accommodate their new audience of policy makers and advocates 'taking into account the overwhelming ethical anthropocentrism of most humans.'[37] In this view, philosophers are out of step with policy makers who shape the environmental regulations and international agreements that effect day to day decisions of great impact to the environment. Light then echoed this in the context of discussing the philosophical work that could be done in climate ethics, and noted that philosophers tended to be held back by two kinds of commitments:

> The first is that because most appeals to the claim that nature has nonanthropocentric intrinsic value in the literature require the creation of a new basis for morality, then they are often on shaky philosophical ground. The second is that because these claims by environmental ethicists often wind up asserting that this special kind of natural value outweighs or trumps human needs, these theories are also generally unhelpful when it comes to forming environmental policies.[38]

Light's approach seeks to maximise the impact of ethical thinking on the world as it is, not the idealised world discussed by many deep ecologists or those committed to Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Rather, our environmental thinking will be most effective if it accommodates the policy debates that currently shape the world we live in.

36 Andrew Light, 'Taking Environmental Ethics Public,' (2002) In *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*, 2nd Edition, ed. David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 656.

37 Ibid. 657.

38 Light, 'Climate Ethics for Climate Action', 558. I should mention that Light has a record of advocating this position that goes back to at least to essays from the mid-1990s.

This shift from theory to practice can also be found in popular writers such as Stewart Brand, the founder and editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*. Brand's 2009 book was *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto*. He adopts the phrase 'ecopragmatist' for his title and on the opening page announces that

> When roles shift, ideologies have to shift, and ideologies hate to shift. The workaround is pragmatism – 'a practical way of thinking concerned with results rather than with theories and principles.' The shift is deeper than moving from one ideology to another; the shift is to discard ideology entirely.[39]

Brand's version of 'ecopragmatism' moves to 'discard ideology entirely' and this hard-headed practical approach appeals to American sensibilities for action over thinking. While not a professional philosopher, Brand exemplifies the popular approach and popular sense of 'pragmatic.' Another version of 'eco-pragmatism' is 'eco-modernism', a movement that seeks to shift discussion towards technological innovations that solve our environmental problems with geo-engineered solutions. For instance, the group that wrote *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* stressed the successes of past technological solutions and looked forward to an ecological future guided by technological innovations that substitute efficient materials and processes for ecologically inefficient ones:

> Decoupling human well-being from the destruction of nature requires the conscious acceleration of emergent decoupling processes. In some cases, the objective is the development of technological substitutes. Reducing deforestation and indoor air pollution requires the substitution of wood and charcoal with modern energy. In other cases, humanity's goal should be to use resources more productively. For example, increasing agricultural yields can reduce the conversion of forests and grasslands to farms. Humans should seek to liberate the environment from nature.
> Urbanization, agricultural intensification, nuclear power, aquaculture, and desalination are all processes with a demonstrated potential to reduce human demands on the environment, allowing more room for non-human species. Suburbanization, low-yield farming, and many forms of renewable energy production, in contrast, generally require more land and resources and leave less room for nature.[40]

The view emphasises the environmental gains for nature in the technological efficiency of human resource production. The key hope from eco-modernism is generally to work within the given system of economics and politics to find human-friendly solutions to energy needs that will simultaneously benefit the non-human natural world. This benefit to nature is often portrayed as simply being left alone – a natural world preserved from further human exploitation. The authors also approach the difficult issue of climate change with the belief that 'meaningful climate mitigation is fundamentally a technological challenge' and thus that 'even dramatic limits to per capita global consumption would be insufficient to achieve significant climate mitigation.'[41] These proposals are all very general, and this befits the literary form of a manifesto – a general statement of belief and approach. And given that, it is hard to disagree with. Limited by the economic and technological patterns that so powerfully shape the many societies around the globe, who

39 Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 1.
40 Asufu-Adjaye, Brook, et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (April 2015) at www.ecomodernism.org, 18. There are eighteen authors listed in the document. The website describes them as 'signers' to the document.
41 Ibid., 21.

could disagree with the notion that intelligence applied to technological innovations in energy production, agriculture and climate control are necessary for both human flourishing and the preservation of the non-human natural world?

But it is one thing to argue that future technological innovations are necessary, it is another to argue that they are sufficient. One reason to doubt that technological innovations are sufficient is that they have generally arisen and been powered by the capitalist economy that seeks to gain market advantages by technologically perfecting products and processes that help corporations gain price or product benefits over against competitors within a given market, or even outflanking the entire industry by an innovation so dominating that the previous market collapses. Agricultural innovations such as genetically modified seeds might be marketed to us as an altruistic breakthrough for impoverished people to gain nutritional advantages, but we quickly find the corporate interests driving toward greater exploitation. The authors of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* reject such close ties:

> Too often, modernization is conflated, both by its defenders and critics, with capitalism, corporate power, and laissez-faire economic policies. We reject such reductions. What we refer to when we speak of modernization is the long-term evolution of social, economic, political, and technological arrangements in human societies toward vastly improved material well-being, public health, resource productivity, economic integration, shared infrastructure, and personal freedom.[42]

A nice idea, but it is hard not to be skeptical that one can separate these forms of modernisation from capitalism. It is easy to say that one desires the separation, but the way forward is not at all clear. One of the reasons that one might be skeptical is that the position as advanced asks for little or no sacrifice. It asks for little or no personal transformation and essentially leaves human beings and human societies operating and thinking of themselves exactly as we are within the consumer identities of late capitalism. In essence, it offers a promise of avoiding large scale personal and social transformation through energy substitutions that can bring us everything we still now desire without radically altering the self-identity of the species that has crossed every available spot on the earth in search of ways to exploit it for the satisfaction of our desires.

A bias is a kind of blind spot – one thinks that they are seeing everything clearly but in fact misses what is often right there.[43] Intellectually, our blind spots can be manifested in the simple egoist's unarticulated belief that they deserve more than others; or it can occur in groups, in the socially reinforced beliefs that people categorised differently are inferior and deserving of unequal treatment. Another kind of generalised bias is to deflect attention away from long term concerns and to focus our intellectual attentions on achieving shorter term goals. This appeals to the practical mindset that makes decisions based on tangible results and 'common sense.' But the problem with focusing on more immediate results is that it deflects our energies from thinking about longer term cycles, longer term problems, and longer term solutions. If the benefits gained from our attention to practical policy issues also carries the seed of reluctance to actively encounter a more radical interrogation of ourselves and our patterns of living, then we would be selling future solutions for short term gains. It is the position of this argument that environmental solutions will only come from refashioning our self-identity from the consumer models of success

42 Ibid., 28.

43 For more on this use of bias and the blind spot as a metaphor, see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), see chapter 7, especially 244-267.

embedded in our culture's encouragement of satisfying all of our desires. The denial of desires, seems old fashioned and out of step with the upbeat language of the technological futurists.
This disposition towards bias is vividly illustrated in the writings of Pascal Bruckner whose 2013 book *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse* attempts to undercut serious environmental concerns by focusing on a perceived undercurrent of anti-humanism in the environmental movement. The viewpoint functions as a way to preclude the abandonment of desires typical of life in most globalised societies. Bruckner tries to defang traditional environmental arguments under a strategy of discrediting them as fear-producing approaches built on guilt and therefore as 'anti-human.' I would like to consider this strategy as a candidate for a kind of general bias – in which our drive for short-term interests blinds us to the long-term effects of our actions, but this is achieved by deflecting inquiry from the consequences of our exploitation. His claim is essentially that environmentalists are stuck using the ascetic critiques and strategies of outmoded religious practices: 'Consider the meaning of contemporary jargon of the famous carbon footprint that we all leave behind us. What is it, after all, if not the gaseous equivalent of Original Sin, of the stain that we inflict on our Mother Gaia by the simple fact of being present and breathing?'[44] We should be willing to consider Bruckner's point that the use of terror and apocalypse can be self-serving, and may ideologically replace the terror induced by the threat of nuclear war, or hell. On the other hand, the terror of nuclear war wasn't merely a fantasy; and the social consequences of environmental degradation are also real and worthy of a healthier dose of terror than they have been given, even if the scientists who proclaim it function as high priests of an intellectual culture. In this way, Bruckner serves to prevent the required insights about the consequences of climate change by the ad hominem strategy of labelling environmentalists as fanatics who want to deprive us of pleasure. But the re-enforcement of the bias continues, even as Bruckner does address the environmental challenge. The key to his solution is not in giving up consumer desires. Rather the solution is to embrace a science-fiction like vision of future technology. He notes that

> A race has begun between the forces of despair and those of human ingenuity. In other words, the remedy is found in the disease […], in the despised industrial civilization, the frightening science, the endless crisis, the globalization that exceeds our grasp: Only an increase in research, an explosion of creativity, or an unprecedented technological advance will be able to save us. We have to try to push back the boundaries of the possible by encouraging the most fantastic initiatives, the most mind-boggling ideas. We have to transform the increasing scarcity of resources into a wealth of inventions. We may be at the dawn of an unheard-of revival of architecture, building construction, industry, and agriculture ….[45]

Bruckner's strategy is appealing: we can think our way out of this problem rather than give up the consumer desires that we have grown up with and which we now cannot imagine life without. We can exploit our resources and get away with it by being cleverer than we ever have been. Of course, that's a useful fantasy and wildly imaginative. It also indulges the satisfaction of the wealthier consumer class. By his strategy, we are allowed to enjoy our present conditions and remain optimistic that geniuses will save us from ourselves. Bruckner is the crude version of ecomodernism given by the *Manifesto* author's reliance on energy substitutions. His position represents the naked desire to cling to the status quo and be rescued from ourselves. My point here is

44 Pascal Bruckner, *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse: Save the Earth, Punish Human Beings*, trans. Steven Rendell (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2013), 2.
45 Bruckner, *Fanaticism*, 184-185.

not to address the anti-environmentalist arguments head on, but rather note the strategies that are devised which allow us to avoid the unpleasant conclusions that are considered non-controversial by climate scientists. I would also like to add that this approach has its merits. As advanced by the ecomodernists, creative solutions have been a hallmark of success since the industrial revolution, and they should be encouraged for our environmental problems. But we can smell the odour of a lingering bad faith that allows us to persist in the practices that we know are damaging while clinging to the fantastic hope of a technological rescue by a *scientist-ex-machina*. In the end, I would argue that the likely interpretation is that our fantastic hopes for a scientific miracle are based on our inability to give up our self-image as contemporary consumers. Part of the issue then may be that we cannot hope for the future because we have no viable self-images beyond our roles in a consumer society. Despite Bruckner's contrast of religious anti-humanism, we detect an almost religious faith, hope and love for techno-capitalism. This position on our identity is presaged by the Frederic Jameson epigram at the top of the paper. It does seem easier to imagine the destruction of the earth than to imagine any alternative to consumer capitalism. The question extends the problem of bias: we interpret our failure of imagination as a difficulty in technological innovation, rather than a failure of imagination in re-thinking who we are outside the consumer civilisation we are locked into.

Here we have another false dichotomy, in this case Bruckner restricts the options to either we embrace the dazzling technological future or we are just pleasure-denying anti-humanists. Of course, the argument has its attraction not only because as all humans we love pleasure and freedom, but also because it allows to remain in stasis – the option to remain as I am without the difficulties involved in changing into a different kind of person lend the position a believability that is not warranted by its argument.

If Zerzan had romanticised the primitivism of pre-civilised humans and tried to solve the problems of the present by reversion to the past, the futurists have misplaced their faith in hoping that an intensification of modernist technologies would be sufficient to ensure an ecologically sound future in the celebration of the Anthropocene Era.[46] But the patterns of human exploitation have not receded. Exploitation of natural resources, of domesticated animals, and of other humans continues apace with no realistic end in sight. New technologies do change impacts, but they also often fall under the control of wealthy and powerful interests rather than the liberalised, egalitarian vision of the futurists.

While placing too much emphasis on a particular political regime may not be prudent, the 2016 election of Donald Trump exemplifies a great weakness of the modernist approach. After so many people worked so hard for theoretical and practical solutions to our environmental and climate problems, it can all be rolled back by a wave of deregulation and greed stemming from an identity grounded in the consumer ideal of the satisfaction of unlimited desires. The unfolding of that presidential term points to the promise of corporate exploitation satisfying insatiable greed for more and more and it appears politically fueled by the scapegoating of minority groups to explain why many middle class consumers have not been matching such consumer 'success.' My argument, at any rate, is that the transformation of our self-identity is a necessary condition for the any viable solution to our continued exploitation. And as bright and noble as many of the goals of the ecopragmatists and ecomodernists are, they will not succeed if we remain rooted in the self-identity

46 The authors of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* embrace this central anthropogenic role, similar to Andrew Light's rejection of nonanthropocentric notions of value: 'We value the liberal principles of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism in themselves, even as we affirm them as keys to achieving a *great* Anthropocene.' Asufu-Adjaye, Brook, et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 31.

of capitalist consumers. Deflection away from the traditional philosophical task of re-thinking ourselves must be avoided. Our task is not merely technological, but also a spiritual one.

Conclusion: The Future Primitive

Climate change and the dramatic consequences that may be in our near future have transformed our problem from a personal decision about limiting one's desires to one of global policy. And this point changes the debate on primitivism. For the discussion is no longer a simple matter of choosing the best alternative lifestyle in the context of an individual life. The environmental exigencies of the 21st Century are forcing us to reconsider the very model of human living on a universal scale. We can no longer afford to limit our reflections on primitivism to a personal decision of lifestyle fulfillment. We are confronted with the consequences of our environmental impact by every individual and on every individual. This is the 'unpleasant alternative' that I referred to in the introduction. It is unpleasant because we have to change who we are, and that involves not only shedding our consumer identity but also the products and habits we have acquired that are unnecessarily drawn out of the earth and fill it back up again as waste. In short, we have to give up on many of these desires. As such, our mode of living is no longer one in which we can choose any appealing lifestyle without impacting the rest of the globe. If we have any moral obligations at all, we have an obligation to do no gratuitous harm to another. And if we have any rights at all, we have the right not to be gratuitously harmed by another.[47] But now we are aware of the environmental impact that comes with basic levels of consumption in middle-class living around the world: greenhouse gases that come from fossil fuel production of electricity and auto emissions, emissions and land use for increased red meat consumption, waste products from production and consumption that contaminate the air, water, and land that we share with fellow humans and that we leave to our descendants. This constitutes a form of involuntary harm on others. Each element that impacts on other human beings simultaneously impacts a myriad of other species and the consequences of our consumption ripples through a multitude of ecosystems. This means that the choice of a lifestyle is no longer simply a personal or individual decision. It is a decision that has to be made in awareness of, and in conjunction with, other people.

But we are also faced with the need to embrace the scientific and technological solutions that not only function as solutions to our current crises but will also enable us to live equitably as one species of earth's inhabitants along with all the others. This means that, contrary to the false dichotomy's either/or premise, we seem to be faced with, at minimum, a both/and approach. We need technological solutions for our technological problems but we also need a complete spiritual transformation of our self-conception and our understanding of our place on earth. Our way out, if we make it, will not be pleasant but it must be future oriented rather than a reversion to the past.

Curiously, we might gesture to an individual to help us re-think ourselves and reconceive a new kind of human self-identity – the Future Primitive. When Henry David Thoreau went to live in the woods near Walden Pond on 4th July 1845, it was meant to enact a meditation on primitivism, the past, the future, environmental degradation, consumerism, and more. Or, maybe more accurately, it *came to mean* all these things as Thoreau progressively came to understand the implications of his decision. Initially seeking a mode of living that gave him the freedom

47 For a view on the right not be harmed and its relation to climate change, see John Broome's *Climate Matters* (Oxford: 2012), especially chapters 4 and 5.

to live a writer's life without much income, it allowed him to explore a model of simple living that was 'primitivist' and yet never intended to be a complete isolation from civilisation. It is also significant that one of the writing projects from this experiment in simple living – that masterpiece of American literature, *Walden* – has become one of the literary and philosophical foundations of the environmental movement. One of the crucial elements in Thoreau's work is the transformation that he undergoes away from being a member of a consumer society through his retreat into the woods by Walden Pond. Like a hero in a story of old, Thoreau was wounded by his encounter with the beast, in this case, the acquisitive society that gauged success in life by material possessions: 'what is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in our own lives? The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life.'[48] But Thoreau didn't stay in the woods. He returned to live in Concord, as a writer, as a naturalist, and as a public lecturer. Thoreau learned a form of primitivism in his two year exodus into the woods, but didn't remain there. Nor was he ultimately seduced by his admittedly romantic infatuation with Native American ways of living. Thoreau returned to staid, middle class, Concord having shed such inhibiting self-conceptions since 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.'[49] My point is that Thoreau did not seek a past primitivism. He didn't even forsake the technologies and sciences of his day. But he had transformed himself through primitivism toward a future model which combined the power and simplicity of voluntary poverty with his best efforts to use the most current science and technology to achieve an ecologically sound and sensitive life. As Thoreau had recounted a tale from Darwin's voyages, he reflected 'Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilised man?'[50] I propose that Thoreau made that combination in himself. And importantly for us, he became that person. He grew up in a middle class household. His father was a shopkeeper and there were neither woodsmen nor even farmers in his family. His education was 'classical' meaning that he was drilled in foreign languages and literature. There was nothing to prepare him for anything other than middle class consumer life. But Thoreau's intelligence and encounter with nature through the voluntary poverty that he embraced enabled him to become an amateur naturalist and most famously an articulate voice for a new form of living. He became a future primitive.

We live in different times, with newer technologies and a different sense of the dangers of the planet than Thoreau did. But it is clear that our need is for a similar profile of human living: to shed the consumer identity that we are saturated in, immerse ourselves instead in a naturalistic and environmental ecological sensibility, and from there utilise the best science and technology at our disposal to transform ourselves and protect the world we currently are exploiting.

In this essay, I have argued that typical approaches to our environmental future fall into the pattern of a false dilemma fallacy. Either a past primitivism that renounces advanced technologies, or a techno-futurism designed to avoid the problems generated by consumer culture and identity. In classic dilemma fashion, these are presented as contradictories when in fact they are merely contraries. Finally, I have offered a third alternative which has the virtue of bringing forward the best in each approach. Yet, it comes with a price: we must shed our consumer mentality and reforge our identities for a new era. In the words of Thoreau, 'it appears as if men had deliberately

48 Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden', in (1854) *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer, (New York: Penguin, 2012), 209.

49 Ibid., 203.

50 Ibid., 207. I should add that Thoreau had a slightly more sophisticated use of the term 'savage' than we do. Thoreau was aware that the etymology of the term referred to 'people in the woods' and for Thoreau this was a complimentary label. Being educated and aware of the unrefined views of many of his fellow citizens, he also employed it ironically.

chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices.'[51]

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51 Ibid., 203.