

## Rethinking the Political Animal: Anti-Civilizationism in North America

*Note to the TEMS Roundtable Participants:*

*My plan for the roundtable is to discuss how (a) risk might be understood as a constitutive act of research, and (b) the various techniques that exist for researchers to render the bizarre (or, the violent) legible in the language of academic exchange. However, given the time constraints I will not be able to provide adequate context for my overarching research project, so I submit to you a relatively recent research proposal. My apologies for the researcher-ly tone. - Harlan*

Twenty years ago, Feral Faun distributed the manifesto, “Feral Revolution,” and boldly asserted, “Previous revolutionaries have only explored the well-mapped territories of power. I want to explore and adventure in the unmapped, and unmappable, territories of wild freedom. The revolution that can create the world I want has to be a *feral revolution*” (1989). Feral Faun’s declaration not only signaled a break with previous political and environmental activisms, but it also called into question the anthropocentric constitution of the ‘modern’ political subject by entreating readers to “become-feral” or “re-wild” with the goal of breaking free from the “domesticating logic” of civilization. And, indeed, twenty years later, Feral Faun’s words continue to resonate with self-proclaimed “anti-civilizationist” communities, which are organized around a collective desire to opt-out of civilization by: (1) strategically ‘de-linking’ aspects of everyday life from patterns of social interaction believed to be constituted by a capitalistic social order; (2) practicing skill sets presumed to be central to pre-agricultural existence;<sup>1</sup> (3) embracing “feral life” by calling into question distinctions between humans and nonhumans, and society and nature; and (4) engaging in environmental stewardship by maintaining strong ties to immediate land bases.

The organizing principle of anti-civilizationism – opting-out of a capitalistic social order – is certainly lofty, and it raises a number of concerns. First, one might question the claims of anti-civilizationism through an inquiry into premises that posit sweeping categories such as “civilization,” “pre-civilization,” “modern,” and “primitive,” to name a few. Second, given the centrality of practical knowledge of particular skill sets, questions emerge as to how such knowledge is claimed, the manner in which it is put into practice, and towards what end(s). Third, questions emerge as to whether anti-civilizationism offers an efficacious platform for a new political project that breaks with prior forms of political practice. With these issues in mind, my research investigates contemporary anti-civilizationist discourse, and how its affiliated forms of knowledge and practice combine to constitute anti-civilizationist communities in North America.

### *-Existing Scholarship-*

With the exception of a few key texts (Best and Nocella 2006, Jensen 2006a and 2006b, Zerzan 1998 and 1994), there exists a lack of critical scholarship pertaining to anti-civilizationism. This lack stems from, in part, the relative inaccessibility of anti-civilizationist communities due to isolationist tendencies, a general distrust of law enforcement, explicit

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<sup>1</sup> Often termed “primitive skills” or “traditional skills,” these skill sets refer to hunting, gathering, animal tracking, flint knapping, fire by friction, etc.

patterns of anti-academicism, and critical disregard for leftist intellectual traditions. The most substantive literature concerning anti-civilizationism is located within the broader radical environmental activism milieu – a body of work composed of manifestos and communiqués written for the expressed purpose of denouncing contemporary technologies and global capitalism in order to posit novel forms of social organization and ecological defense.

Outside this internal body of literature, there are areas of scholarship where this topic has been tangentially addressed. Environmental activism, social movements, and environmental stewardship have been recurrent themes in Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, and Ecology literatures. Furthermore, the challenges faced by various activist communities across the world are well-documented by a highly interdisciplinary body of scholarship. For example, eco-philosophical scholarship has engaged with the epistemological foundations of environmentalism, and attended to eco-/biocentric interpretations of the environment (Hinchman 2001). Various approaches in Geography, Sociology, and Anthropology have challenged environmentalists' conception of nature as a mere given, and emphasized the blurred distinctions between nature and society, and humans and nonhumans (Braun 2006, Latour 1993, Proctor 2007). Scholarship related to 'embodied knowing' has provided insight into how meaning is created through complex interactions between humans and their immediate environments (Ingold 2000, Willerslev 2007). And, social movement theory has shed light on why social mobilization occurs and the various collective forms it might take, including radical environmental movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2003).

While these approaches offer valuable theoretical frameworks to critically examine radical environmentalism, the anti-civilizationist phenomenon throws many of these frameworks into question. In particular, the aforementioned literature is not well-positioned to take into full account: (1) anti-civilizationists' desire to break free from pre-existing forms of political practice; (2) the reclamation and subsequent reproduction of specific forms of knowledge and practice deemed central to anti-civilizationist community-building; and (3) the appeals to "become-feral," which signal the emergence of a novel political consciousness predicated on the strategic decentering of modern political subjectivity.

In order to address the gaps in existing scholarship, my research aims to make critical interventions into these bodies of literature by centering around three principal questions:

1. Under what social contexts do anti-civilizationist communities take form, and how do community members represent these contexts to themselves and others?
2. How are nature-society and human-nonhuman relationships reworked through the (re)production of "ancient" knowledge and practice of "primitive" skills?
3. What is the significance of the shift in anti-civilizationist political consciousness, which calls into question prior forms of radical political practice?

#### *-Methodological Considerations-*

In response to these questions, I employ a mixed methods approach to the field of study. The decision to focus on constitutive social contexts is highly strategic. Since many anti-civilizationists are subject to harassment by local authorities, my research takes steps to shield the locations of the communities with which I plan to engage, protect the anonymity of community members, and minimize the potential of putting informants at risk. First, I conduct discourse analyses of *public domain* anti-civilizationist literature to shed light on the ontological foundations of the critique. Second, for ethnographic field research I have selected communities

that do not engage in confrontational forms of protest (i.e., property destruction), thus minimizing the potential of either recording or participating in illegal activity.

My methodological approach to the reworking of human-nonhuman and nature-society relationships is largely dependent on discourse analyses of anti-civilizationist literature, combined with deep ethnographic field research. With the idea of feral existence in mind, particular attention is paid to the manner in which anti-civilizationists: (1) understand their relationships to their immediate land bases; (2) physically interact with land bases through the practice of “primitive skills”; and (3) practice environmental stewardship in consideration of local flora and fauna. Thus far, I have taken important steps to not only familiarize myself with the tenets of anti-civilizationism, but I have also learned many of the skills associated with it. This helps to mediate my role as researcher and enables me to be an effective, trustworthy, and contributing member of a given community.

Lastly, I approach the political shifts in anti-civilizationism through discourse analyses of predominant anti-civilizationist literature, ethnographic field research, and unstructured interviewing. Here, focus is placed on personal, albeit anonymous, political narrative. In particular, my primary interest is in how anti-civilizationists understand: (1) their relationship to authority; (2) their relationship to alternative forms of political and environmental practice that might be understood as reform-oriented; and, (3) what it means to live and act politically outside established modes of political engagement (or, “in the unmapped, and unmappable, territories of wild freedom”).

#### *-Present State of Research-*

To date, I have logged over a month of ethnographic field research at the ROOTS School of Primitive Skills in central Vermont (University of Minnesota IRB approval #0806P37661). ROOTS offers courses that significantly overlap with the central tenets of anti-civilizationism: practice of presumed pre-agricultural skills, “indigenous philosophy” courses that challenge human/nonhuman and society/nature divisions, and lessons in environmental stewardship. In addition to taking classes, I have conducted several hours of unstructured interviews with instructors, while living and working with members of the ROOTS community.<sup>2</sup>

#### *-Remarks on the Importance of the Proposed Research-*

The topic of anti-civilizationism appears to be a limit case of an extreme and isolated subset of radical environmental politics. My work suggests that this is not so extreme of a case, however. Anti-civilizationism’s reworking of alternative environmentalist practice, coupled with the development of new political imaginaries, resonates with other activist communities of different persuasions. In particular, the act of calling into question the philosophical precepts of what constitutes human subjects, reclaiming antiquated knowledge for sustainable futures, and rethinking what it means to live and practice a radical politics crucially factor into the study of environmental politics and activism in a much broader sense. By engaging and benefiting from current debates in Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, Ecology, and History my research will address the lack of critical scholarship pertaining to anti-civilizationism and make

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<sup>2</sup> This preliminary stage of research is carried out in two related contexts. First, ROOTS provides insight into how forms of knowledge attributed to the distant past are reclaimed and put into practice in a contemporary setting. Second, given that participation in anti-civilizationist communities is partly predicated on the acquisition of specific skill sets, my research at ROOTS is also an investment towards future dissertation research in other anti-civilizationist communities, planned for the summer and fall of 2010.

significant contributions to interdisciplinary research on the emergence of novel forms of political practice and environmental activism, in addition to critical reevaluations of what constitutes modern political subjectivity.

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