

Cooperative Scavenging

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“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.

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