# Thoughts from the forest, ecovillage and sickbed on our beliefs about nature and anarcho-primitivism by Ed Jones, November 2013



After living in the forest for a year, helping set up an eco-village, co-organising wilderness gatherings, meeting many people with, or supportive of, anarcho-primitivist (or indigenist )[1] belief systems and then ending up very ill from a countryside-associated disease, I want to share some hard-learned thoughts.

In particular I explore how it can be dangerous when people advocate belief systems when they have not fully explored their practical consequences or applied them to their own lives. This is especially true when those belief systems - as I try to show with anarcho-primitivism - advocate a very radical break from society, which can alter every aspect of our lives.

**An introduction to belief systems**

All of us have belief systems[23] through which we interpret – and understand - the world around us, which in turn guide the actions that we take. Belief systems are a framework of ideas, knowledge and experiences that we hold at any one time and which we use to make decisions. They may be religious, philosophical or ideological, and they underpin what we value and what we think is right and wrong.

These belief systems often change throughout our lives as we are exposed to new ideas and experiences through reading, discussing, working, loving, losing, struggling, raising families or having many other life experiences. These ideas often change if we try to put them into practice and find that the reality is different from what we expected.

All of us have been born into an incredibly complex world and experience it very differently. We are all part of different ecosystems, surrounded by species which are often interdependent in ways we do not realise. Scientific knowledge is advancing at an unprecedented rate, leaving many of us

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[1] In this article I use the term 'anarcho-primitivism,' only because I wanted to use one term throughout the article. However, I do recognise that Derrick Jensen has rejected the term "primitivist" because, in his words, it's a "racist way to describe indigenous peoples." He prefers "indigenist" or "ally to the indigenous," because "indigenous peoples have had the only sustainable human social organizations, and … we need to recognize that we [colonizers] are all living on stolen land." http://www.zoeblunt.ca/2011/03/20/uncivilized/

[2] For more on belief systems, see these articles by Robert Anton Wilson: 'Left and Right: A Non-Euclidean Perspective' http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robert-anton-wilson-left-and-right-a-non-euclidean-perspective and 'In Doubt We Trust - Cults, religions, and BS in general' http://www.gettingit.com/article/391

[3] Timothy Leary has called them 'Reality Tunnels': https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_tunnel

behind and yet influencing so much of how the world around us works. We are often surrounded by human or machine-made products, of which we have little idea where or how they are made (or what happens to them when they are thrown away). We are governed by incredibly complex political, economic and legal systems - developed over hundreds or thousands of years - which are local, national and international, and which only a small percentage of people really understand. We are all born into families with different professional backgrounds, amounts of wealth and education. Throughout our working lives many of us have highly specialised jobs, where we are often only exposed to narrow groups of people, ideas and tasks. We are bombarded with information, some of which we choose based on our existing belief systems, which can in turn perpetuate them. This information often has known - and unknown - vested interests and biases behind it and is ultimately trying to influence our actions.

In light of all of this we try to understand the complex world around us through different belief systems based on our very unique experiences and knowledge. We develop frameworks or belief systems which try to explain what is going on and offer solutions to the problems we face.

**The environment or mother nature**

Over the years I have been especially fascinated by the different belief systems that people have on "the environment" or "mother nature", because it is the life system we are all a part of and are dependent on. This is partly why I went to live in the forest and helped set-up a small eco-village – I wanted to practically explore these belief systems.

In the last few decades "the environment" has been increasingly on our minds because the impacts of Western lifestyles have become ever more apparent: human-caused climate change, the depletion of natural resources on which our current way of life depends, the melting of the ice caps, widespread pollution, extinction or depletion of various species, deforestation and much more.

Various people have tried to explain the root problems behind this. Some believe that it is the fault of a growing human population which is using ever more resources. Others argue that our excessive production and consumption is the problem, especially because of the overwhelming focus on economic growth and profit of the state corporate capitalist system in which we live. Some say that it is the discovery of fossil fuels such as oil which has led down this path or that the fault lies with the energy intensive technologies that humans have developed, particularly since the start of the industrial revolution. Others say that it is the increasing urbanisation of our species, which requires increasing amounts of resources to import goods into urban areas and which fundamentally disconnects us from the land where these goods are coming from (and going to when we throw them away). Some give more class based explanations, arguing that those who own and control most of the world (the very rich or 1%) make the rest of us work and produce much more than we need to so they can benefit from the profits of our labour. Yet others give psychological reasons, looking at historical – and current - human behaviour patterns to explain human desires to consume ever more goods. There are many more theories trying to explain the environmental crisis.

Similarly, depending on peoples' belief systems and what they think to be realistic, there has been a long list of solutions proposed to counter these problems. These range from technological solutions which claim that we can carry on living as we do but replace our fossil fuel energy supplies with renewable and/or nuclear energy. Others think that our economic and political model is at fault and

needs to be fundamentally reformed, including severely regulating or even banning corporations and changing our priorities away from economic growth. Some propose relocalising our economies and even promote eco-villages, going back to the land, permaculture, forest gardening and organic agriculture as solutions. Others think we are stuck in an unstoppable system which is doomed to collapse so we may as well enjoy our time on earth while we have it.

A good example of this range of opinions is given by Jonathan Porritt in the book *Capitalism as if the World Matters*, where he outlines the importance of belief systems for environmentalists when it comes to determining what actions we should take in relation to the dominant economic system - capitalism:

"If, as a politically active environmentalist or campaigner for social justice, one's answer to the question is they are, indeed mutually exclusive (that capitalism, in whichever manifestation, is in its very essence inherently unsustainable), then one's only morally consistent response is to devote one's political activities to the overthrow of capitalism. If one's answer is that they are entirely compatible (that there are no structural, inherent characteristics within a capitalist system that would make sustainability an unattainable goal), then it is morally consistent to pursue sustainable development (as the path that leads to that goal) within and through that capitalist system. And if one's answer is that they are only compatible under certain conditions (it isn't capitalism per se that is at issue here, but which model of capitalism), then the transformation of those aspects of contemporary capitalism that are incompatible with the attainment of sustainability becomes both a moral and a political precondition of being an effective environmentalist or campaigner for social justice." (p. 87)

As Porritt points out, what we believe about capitalism and sustainability can determine where we focus our energies. Do we try and reform capitalism or overthrow it? Belief systems guide what we think is the right thing to do and in turn our actions.

**Anarcho-primitivism**

A few years ago I was fascinated by one belief system which has influenced a lot of people - anarcho-primitivism. This is one of the reasons I went and lived in the forest – to practically explore some of its ideas as well as just wanting to learn more about nature first-hand. Within the environmental movement there has always been a strand of thought which questions the wisdom of much of modernity. However, writers such as John Zerzan and Derrick Jensen go further and question not just technology and capitalism, but the benefits of civilisation itself.[4]

Rather than misrepresent their ideas and arguments I'd recommend you read their books or watch them speak if you really want to understand what they have to say (they have many videos on the internet).[5] One good place to start is an interview of John Zerzan by Derrick Jensen.[6]

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[4] In this article I focus on Jensen and Zerzan, however I acknowledge that there are many other anarcho-primitivist writers who have different views on a wide range of subjects.

[5] Throughout my life I have often seen peoples' ideas misrepresented to suit personal – or organisational - interests, so I always recommend others to go back to what people actually said in source texts or speeches.

[6] An interview with John Zerzan & Derrick Jensen, December 5 2010:
http://www.everythingology.com/enemy-of-the-state-an-interview-with-john-zerzan-derrick-jensen/

I summarise some of their ideas in this article, albeit in an incomplete way. Both Jensen and Zerzan argue that humans have lived as hunter gatherers for most of humanity and civilisation has risen relatively recent in human history. According to Jensen and Zerzan, hunter gatherer tribes were – and still are in some places - relatively egalitarian, relaxing and peaceful societies whose way of life was/is genuinely sustainable.

They argue that the rise of agriculture – around 10,000 years ago – led to food surpluses in hunter-gatherer tribes. These surpluses introduced higher levels of inequality into the tribes as some looked after – and controlled – the food supply. These surpluses also enabled greater division of labour within society as some people could pursue (voluntarily or involuntarily) activities other than food collection. They also argue that the rise of agriculture fundamentally shifted our attitude to the rest of nature as we tried to domesticate and control it for our own means, rather than just taking from – and being a part of – wild nature. Ultimately, the rise of agriculture enabled the rise of cities and civilisation as we know it. To be clear, Jensen defines civilisation as:

"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*), with cities being defined—so as to distinguish them from camps, villages, and so on—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."[7]

For both Jensen and Zerzan, the rise of civilisation was the beginning of many of our environmental and social problems. As cities grew they required more resources to be imported into them which led, for example, to forests being chopped down for building supplies, fuel or to provide land for farming. Nowadays around half the world's population live in urban areas, with around 80% of people in Northern European countries living in urban areas.[8] What is needed to sustain our current way of life in those cities is well documented. We can, if we want, visit the clear-cuts, mines or factories spread across the planet which sustain cities and see first-hand the devastating impact they have on many different eco-systems.

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[7]Jensen, Derrick (2006) Endgame. Quote is from this chapter:  http://www.endgamethebook.org/Excerpts/3-Civilization.htm
[8]World Urbanization Prospects - The 2011 Revision, UNDESA, http://esa.un.org/unup/pdf/WUP2011_Highlights.pdf

*Ekati Diamond Mine, Nothwest Territories, Canada – Source: When Earth is Scarred Forever – http://io9.com/when-earth-is-scarred-forever-495971504 - website has a collection of photos and information about some of the world's biggest open cast mines.*

Jensen and Zerzan believe that our current state capitalist industrial civilisation is completely unsustainable and will eventually collapse. They point out that humans are using up non-renewable finite resources, such as oil, at an ever increasing rate to sustain our current way of life and that this can not continue. Jensen quotes a friend of his, George Draffan, in his book *Endgame* as saying:

"(...) the only sustainable level of technology is the Stone Age. What we have now is the merest blip—we're one of only six or seven generations who ever have to hear the awful sound of internal combustion engines (especially two-cycle)—and in time we'll return to the way humans have lived for most of their existence. Within a few hundred years at most. The only question will be what's left of the world when we get there."[9]

Jensen and Zerzan go further than this. They want people not just to wait for the collapse of civilisation, which they think may take hundreds of years and cause massive destruction of eco-systems and other species, but for people to actively work to bring about its downfall, by whatever means necessary, as soon as possible before too much damage happens. They want humans to revert to Stone Age technology and return to the land to live a more genuinely sustainable existence. They advocate that people go through a process known as "rewilding" to overcome human domestication and return to behaviour supposedly inherent in wild humans.

**Knowledge based on experience?**

Over the years I have come to most respect knowledge gained from a combination of theory and practice. For example, if I want to really learn about agriculture I read books and journal articles about it as well as trying to grow plants myself. I learn through trial and error as well as speaking to

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[9]Jensen, Derrick (2006) Endgame. Quote is from this chapter: http://www.endgamethebook.org/Excerpts/4-Catastrophe.htm

people who have more experience than me. Once I gain sufficient practical and theoretical knowledge, I can then teach other people, which deepens my knowledge on the subject as new issues come up, which in turn further embeds it in my mind. This whole process can throw up lots of new ideas and insights at different stages over several years, especially when coming up against unexpected challenges when trying to turn theoretical knowledge into what practically works in reality.

I have met many people who consider themselves teachers, whether in academic institutions or other places. Some of these teachers have a good balance of theoretical knowledge and practical experience on the subjects they are teaching, while others are more one-sided towards either theory or practice.

One of my main problems with anarcho-primitivism is that it is often advocated by people who have a lot of theoretical knowledge gained from the written word, but little practical knowledge. To give an example, I met John Zerzan a few years ago and asked him: "Have you ever lived in the forest or with hunter gatherers?" He said he had been at a wilderness camp for a few weeks.

At the time this really shocked me. This is a man who has written several books and gives speeches around the world advocating a certain belief system – and is influencing many people – and yet has very little personal, practical experience of what it would really be like to live as a hunter-gatherer. If he had more personal practical experience he would probably have more nuanced and complex belief systems about civilisation and hunter gatherers. Depending on whether his experience in the forest (and/or with hunter gatherers) is positive or negative, his theoretical knowledge would be shaped by the experience. He might not even survive the experience, as he might be killed by accident, disease, starvation, the weather, wild animals or one of the many other challenges the wilderness holds. Thus we might not even hear his new point of view.

**Countryside associated diseases**

One of the other problems I have with Zerzan and Jensen is that they often underplay or ignore the dangers of living in the countryside and going back to the land. They regularly write and speak about the illnesses and diseases that living in cities and our modern way of life give us. This may in part be due to Derrick Jensen's personal experience of having Crohn's disease, which he calls a "disease of civilisation."[10] This is one of the justifications he uses to access industrial evidence-based healthcare while simultaneously speaking against it (to clarify here: I am in no way against Derrick Jensen receiving healthcare).

However, what about the many diseases that humans can catch from the countryside, some of which can kill or disable us? Depending on which eco-systems we are living in, and what exactly we are doing in those eco-systems, we can catch a wide range of diseases from insects, animals, plants, soils and water.

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[10] Transcript of a six part video interview with Derrick Jensen
http://deoxy.org/media/Derrick_Jensen/Interview

The American Veterinary Medical Foundation publishes a general guide about diseases that hunters and their hunting dogs may encounter in the United States.[11] This gives a good introduction to some of the many diseases associated with the countryside in that environment, including:

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|---|---|
| · Anaplasmosis | · Lyme Disease (Lyme borreliosis) |
| · Avian Influenza | · Plague |
| · Babesiosis | · Q fever |
| · Brucellosis | · Rabies |
| · Campylobacteriosis (Campylobacter jejuni) | · Raccoon Roundworm (Baylisascarisprocyonis) |
| · Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) | · Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (tick-borne typhus fever) and other spotted fevers |
| · Cryptosporidiosis | · Salmonellosis (Salmonella species) |
| · Deer Parapoxvirus | · Sarcoptic mange |
| · Hydatid Tapeworms (Echinococcosis) | · Toxoplasmosis |
| · Ehrlichiosis | · Trichinellosis (trichinosis) |
| · Equine Encephalitis Viruses | · Tuberculosis |
| · Escherichia coli Infection (E. coli) | · Tularemia |
| · Giardiasis | · West Nile Virus |
| · Hantavirus | |
| · Leptospirosis | |

I can't help but wonder if Jensen or Zerzan had a disabling countryside associated disease, would they still think in the same way? Unless they go through it themselves, they will not know how it feels to be ill in that way or how it will affect how they think about the world. I also wonder if they spent less time writing books and giving speeches, and more time living on the land, whether they would contract more diseases and therefore have a different perspective?

I have learnt this lesson the hard way.

Living on the land, becoming seriously ill with a countryside associated disease and having ongoing medical treatment has made me think about the countryside and civilisation in very different ways. Meeting and speaking to several people who have contracted chronic, debilitating illnesses, from living in - or visiting- the countryside has also further changed my opinions. I have also read of families moving to the countryside in the United States to give their children a better way of life, only for the entire family to contract diseases and become chronically ill from insects, such as ticks, and then move back into the city to try and get away from further countryside associated illness.[12] A similar problem exists in many parts of Europe, as this tick species distribution map shows:

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[11] 'Disease precautions for hunters ', American Veterinary Medical Foundation: https://www.avma.org/public/Health/Pages/Disease-Precautions-for-Hunters.aspx
[12] For stories of people and families going through this experience, have a look at *Cure Unknown* by Pamela Weintraub. The books website is http://www.cureunknown.com/
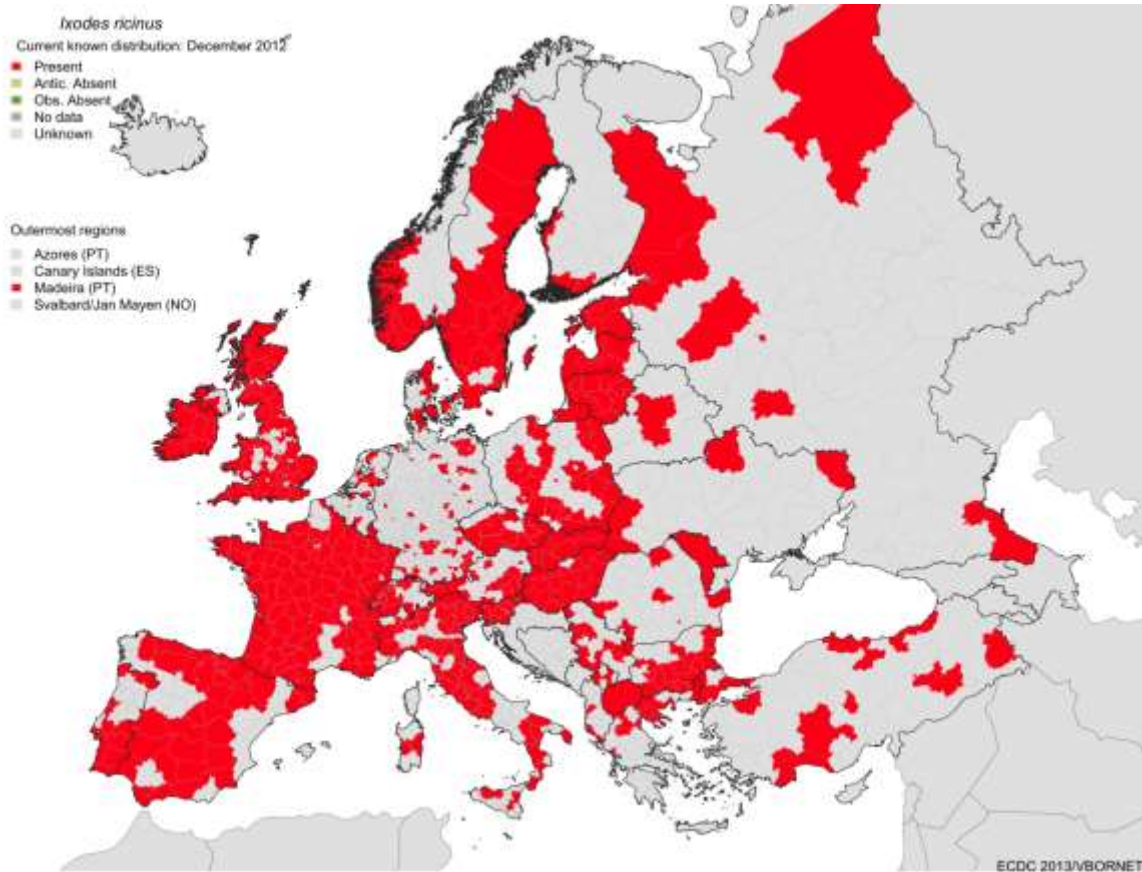
*Ixodes Ricinus tick species distribution map. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Source:*
*http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/activities/diseaseprogrammes/emerging_and_vector_borne_disease s/pages/vbornet-maps-tick-species.aspx*

Both the countryside and the city have a long list of illnesses and risks associated with them. If they are going to advocate returning to the land, then it would be better if Zerzan and Jensen gave a more balanced view of the risks and diseases associated with that way of life. Their belief systems can be very influential, and it would be better if they gave a health warning to people who want to practically explore them.

**Practically applying anarcho-primitivist ideas?**

One of the main problems I have with the anarcho-primitivist belief system is that it often does not work if we try to apply them practically in our real lives. For example, I use condoms when I have sex to prevent unwanted pregnancies and from catching Sexually Transmitted Infections. Similarly I would recommend other people to use contraception, unless they want to have children. If my friends or family contract a disease I would recommend that they go to a doctor for examination and treatment (if possible). I would be surprised if anyone reading this genuinely does not agree with these statements.

If you agree with the above statements, then you want an industrial healthcare system. You would also want the healthcare system to use treatments which are based on very strong scientific evidence, for example through double-blinded placebo controlled trials, so doctors know which

treatments work.[13] You may even want an industrial healthcare system which is free at point of use, paid for by taxes, like the National Health System in the UK.[14]

The problem is that there are big environmental trade-offs:  an industrial healthcare system requires factories, mines, fossil fuel extraction, chemicals and plastic waste disposal to exist. Most humans want access to industrial evidence-based healthcare if we contract a disease, including many people from hunter-gatherer tribes[15]. Some ascribing to anarcho-primitivism say that they don't want to be treated by industrial evidence-based medical care. However, we do not know what they would think and do if they became very ill.

**Industrial evidence-based healthcare**

Another problem I have with anarcho-primitivism is that people advocating it often ignore or leave out what would happen if industrial evidence-based healthcare did not exist. We can look at different moments in history to think about this.

When the Black Death (bubonic plague) hit Europe in the 12th Century it killed between 30-60 per cent of Europe's population. Some cities and villages in England and Italy were hit especially hard and had an estimated death rate between 70-80 per cent.[16]

I can't even begin to imagine what it would have been like to live through those times; to be surrounded by so much death, disease and despair.

One modern description of the bubonic plague, drawing on medieval texts, is particularly gruesome:

"Tumors covered the body -- some of them as big as an egg or apple, Boccaccio wrote. A large neck tumor might permanently cock a person's head in the opposite direction. Purplish splotches also covered the body. These were nicknamed "God's tokens," because God usually took the sufferer soon after they appeared. The sick even smelled like they were going to die. Bad breath and odors indicated they were rotting from the inside.

"Medieval writers tell us that the fevers resulted in delirium -- madmen wandered the streets, shouting wildly. The sick vomited incessantly or coughed up blood. Pus and blood oozed from sores. Once the symptoms started to appear, the victim was a ticking time bomb and died within days. No

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[13] For an interesting introduction to how double blinded placebo controlled trials work, have a read of *Bad Science* by Ben Goldacre.

[14] The NHS is becoming more and more privatised at the moment, so it is uncertain how long it will exist in this way.

[15] See, for example this from Survival International: http://www.survivalinternational.org/about/amazontribes and this article from the BBC entitled 'Brazilian indigenous groups demand better healthcare' http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-18259233

[16] Austin Alchon, Suzanne (2003) A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective by Suzanne Austin Alchon. Page 21 gives a table with 'Mortality Associated with Epidemics in the old world before 1500': http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YiHHnV08ebkC&pg=PA21&dq=&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=&f=false

one knew what to do. There wasn't enough space in the graveyards, so the bloated bodies were left in the street. Dogs ate corpses while babies cried hungrily beside their dead mothers."[17]

I would not want us to return to this kind of reality and do not know anyone who would. Nowadays, the plague is much more under control, although it does still resurface from time to time. If it is caught early and treated with antibiotics, it can be cured.

Throughout history, many epidemics have swept through human populations:

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[17]'How the Black Death Worked' by Molly Edmondshttp://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/black-death.htm

**Table 1.1 Mortality Associated with Epidemics in the Old World before 1500**

| Location | Date | Disease | Mortality | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Athens | 430 BCE | smallpox | one-quarter of the Athenian army and countless civilians died | Thucydides, 118 |
| Roman Empire | 165–180 CE | smallpox | 25–33 percent of infected population died; 3.5–7 million died | McNeill, 116; Hopkins, 22–23 |
| Egypt | 165–180 CE | smallpox | 30–90 percent decline in number of male taxpayers in several communities | Duncan-Jones, 20–21 |
| Constanti-nople | 541–542 CE | bubonic plague | 40 percent of total population; 10,000 deaths per day in the city | Hopkins, 23 |
| Mediter-ranean region | 6th and 7th centuries | bubonic plague | population reduced by 40–60 percent | Gottfried (1983), 11–12 |
| Izumi Province, Japan | 735–737 CE | smallpox | 44 percent of adult population died; 25–35 percent of the total population died | Farris, 378–81 |
| Japan | 812–814 CE | smallpox | "almost half" of the population died | Farris, 378–81 |
| Cairo | 1347–1349 | Black Death/ bubonic plague | between one-third and one-half of the population (200,000 people) died | Watts, 25–26 |
| "some cities and villages" in England and Italy | 1348–1400 | Black Death/ bubonic plague | 70–80 percent died | Herlihy (1997), 17 |
| Europe | 1348–1420 | Black Death/ bubonic plague | total population reduced by 30–60 percent | Herlihy (1997), 17; Slack, 15 |

*(Source: Austin Alchon, Suzanne (2003) A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective. Page 21*
*http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YiHHnV08ebkC&pg=PA21&dq=&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=&f=false )*

If industrial evidence-based healthcare did not exist, many different diseases would spread more rapidly through human populations. Even now, especially where healthcare systems are limited, diseases like tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and Malaria are having devastating impacts on human

populations.[18] Many diseases are already mutating and evolving drug resistance and scientists are working to develop new drugs to combat this.

Jensen and Zerzan rarely discuss the health consequences if civilisation were to collapse and we did not have access to industrial evidence-based healthcare. The consequences would be horrific.

**Collapse?**

Jensen and Zerzan often underplay what would actually happen if they got what they wished for: the collapse of civilisation. Just imagine if the electricity, telecommunications and transportation networks shut down. Just imagine if the factories stopped producing and the tractors stopped ploughing. Just imagine if the hospitals had equipment shortages and no power.

Food shortages would occur very quickly. Diseases would start spreading more rapidly through the populace. Nuclear reactors could meltdown. People would start dying on a massive scale, including maybe even ourselves, our families and our friends. It is impossible to know how people would react and whether we would turn on each other or if we would try to work together and organise (or, most likely, both). Would riots erupt? Would governments try and enforce their power over the people? There are many unknowns of how such a future would turn out, however the transition would most likely be horrific

Noam Chomsky has famously described such a transition:

"Hunter-gatherer societies, which were all there were for most of human history, may well have had pretty relaxed lives, as Sahlins and others argue. That doesn't change the fact that going back to such a state would mean instant mass genocide on an unimaginable scale."[19]

If anarcho-primitivists understood the full consequences of their belief systems, I suspect that many of them would not be organising to bring down a system which we are dependent on for food, power and healthcare, especially if it would result in "mass genocide".

I sometimes wish that Jensen and Zerzan spent more time exploring what could happen if civilisation collapsed. If they did, their audience would get a more balanced perspective, and understand the pros and cons of anarcho-primitivism. Instead, anarcho-primitivists often try to convince people with strong ideological beliefs which are not grounded in the reality of what it would be like if their ideas were actually realised.

**The positive sides of civilisation?**

I have rarely seen, heard or read Jensen or Zerzan discussing the positive sides of civilisation. Science has been a very mixed blessing for humanity. It has brought nuclear weapons but also amazing medical developments. It has brought gas chambers but also given us the knowledge of bee's complex navigational systems. It has also given us the anthropological history of those hunter-gatherer tribes that Jensen and Zerzan cite in their work.

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[18] For more on this, look at the Global Fund: http://www.theglobalfund.org/en/about/diseases/
[19] 'Comments on Moore' by Noam Chomsky, *Social Anarchism*, February 8, 2006
http://www.chomsky.info/letters/20060208.htm

I am glad for certain things that civilisation has brought us, such as the development of the written word and that I can read. I am glad that past scientists proved that the world is round, rather than flat. I am glad that I can read – and think – about evolution, rather than being force-fed the idea that the world was created by an omnipotent being. I am glad I can access healthcare based on science.

Simultaneously, I acknowledge there are many negative sides to our civilisation, such as the destruction of eco-systems to fuel and feed it, and the widespread pollution that it creates.

The picture is complex and it is unfortunate that Jensen and Zerzan often do not present this complexity.

**The negative aspects of hunter-gather cultures?**

Another aspect that Zerzan and Jensen often underplay is the negative aspects of hunter-gatherer cultures. They sometimes provide a one-sided and unbalanced viewpoint which can romanticise certain ways of living and being. While there are many great things about hunter-gatherer tribes – and they are often much more environmentally sustainable than civilised cultures - they also have many dark sides. I have never lived with hunter-gatherers (so be wary of what I write about them), but I know people who have done so for several years as well as reading written accounts of anthropologists living with them.

I do not want to make generalisations as each tribe has its own culture and traditions. Putting aside the effect of diseases and personal injury, tribes can be severely affected by extreme weather conditions. Inter-tribal warfare, human sacrifices and cannibalism have all occurred in some tribes. Some tribes have ostracised members because they did not fit in with the social norms of the tribe. These people sometimes ended up living alone in difficult conditions, and some die alone.

There is not space in this article to give detailed accounts of peoples' different experiences with tribes. Some are very positive, while others are mixed or even negative. I do not want to idealise hunter-gatherer tribes and underplay the negative aspects of some of their cultures. Either way, there are some tribes which I have heard about in which I would definitely not want to live.

**Belief systems and action**

Because belief systems influence how we interpret the world and what actions we take, it is crucial that we question the ones that we hold. I have seen how anarcho-primitivist belief systems can affect people. At the extreme I knew two people who killed themselves, at least partly influenced by anarcho-primitivism.[20] Another person I know has disappeared while exploring Alaska by himself, and sadly it looks like he has died.[21] Several other people I know, as well as myself, have become very seriously ill by contracting diseases when practically exploring anarcho-primitivist ideas or just by living and working in the countryside.

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[20] The reasons behind suicide are often very complex, so I do not want to simplify these people's deaths. However, I do think that the belief systems those people held probably contributed to the reason why they killed themselves.
[21] For a series of articles about him see here:
http://www.alaskadispatch.com/search/site/%22Thomas%20Seibold%22?solrsort=ds_created%20desc

Jensen and Zerzan often do not acknowledge the power of their ideas and how their belief systems can negatively impact people.

**Final thoughts**

The way we interact with the environment and civilisation changes the way we feel and think about it (and vice-versa). I recommend that people question everything that is written here, read more deeply about it and discuss it. It is important to be open to new ideas, while also being sceptical of them.

I have tried to show some of the problems I have with anarcho-primitivism, focussing on the work of John Zerzan and Derek Jensen. I think it is often advocated by people who do not have that much practical experience of living it and who provide a one-sided perspective. When we try and practically apply it to our lives, it is often impractical or inconsistent with common sense and can lead to serious health or other problems. Also, if taken to its logical conclusion – the collapse of civilisation – it would have absolutely horrific consequences on the human population.

However, while I am very sceptical of anarcho-primitivism as a belief system, I would still recommend that people experiment in interacting with the environment in different ways, as long as you research the risks of doing so, including taking maximum precautions against the diseases you can contract in those environments. Grow some vegetables, visit some clear-cuts and old-growth forests, try to save a species or area from being destroyed, study the plants, animals, insects and diseases that exist in an area. Do not just think about these things in your head, but see how you think and feel when you do them in real life.

**Some further reading which will give you a good spectrum of thought within the environmental movement**

Endgame – Derrick Jensen

Against Civilization – John Zerzan (editor)

5 Common Objections to Primitivism and Why They're Wrong - Jason Godesky
http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jason-godesky-5-common-objections-to-primitivism-and-why-they-re-wrong

Fire and Ice: Disturbing the Comfortable and Comforting the Disturbed While Tracking Our Wildest Dreams - Laurel Luddite

Capitalism as if the World Matters - Jonathan Porritt

Green Economics – Molly Scott Cato

Small is Beautiful – E.F. Schumacher

Green History: A Reader in Environmental Literature, Philosophy, and Politics - Derek Wall

Babylon and Beyond: The Economics of Anti-Capitalist, Anti-Globalist and Radical Green Movements - Derek Wall

The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back – and How We Can Still Save Humanity – James Lovelock

Walden - Henry David Thoreau

Which Way for the Ecology Movement? Essays by Murray Bookchin

How Much is Enough? The Love of Money and the Case for the Good Life - Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky

**Two essays on belief systems and how they impact our actions**

In Doubt We Trust - Cults, religions, and BS in general - Robert Anton Wilson
http://www.gettingit.com/article/391

Left and Right: A Non-Euclidean Perspective - Robert Anton Wilson
http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robert-anton-wilson-left-and-right-a-non-euclidean-perspective