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Irrationalism: Steve Booth Against “The Machine”

Black Flag

In *Green Anarchist* issue 51, Steve Booth, one of *Green Anarchist*'s editors, published “The Irrationalists”, his views on “resistance in the new millennium.” According to Booth, we are entering “the Age of the Irrationalists”, who “commit acts of intense violence against the system with no obvious motives, no pattern.” We are told by Booth that “The Oklahoma bombers had the right idea. The pity was that they did not blast any more government offices.”... The Tokyo sarin cult had the right idea. The pity was that in testing the gas a year prior to the attack they gave themselves away.”

In issue 52, both GA and Booth himself, attempt a retreat from the position initially expressed. In a letter to the Scottish Anarchist Federation, who pulled a speaking tour by the London Gandalf Support Campaign in protest at the content of the article, GA accuse the SAF of “intolerance, credulity and conformism”, presumably for treating Booth’s rantings with the contempt they deserve. Apparently, Booth only wrote the article to “express his anger” at the Operation Washington raids, and GA concede that “maybe Steve goes

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Retrieved on 29 April 2011 from flag.blackened.net
From *Black Flag* #215

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too far affirming certain desperate acts, rather than just acknowledging them as inevitable reactions to an ever-more organised and repressive society”. Booth also tries to escape the logic of the positions he’d earlier put forward, by arguing that “irrationalism” is a product of despair, and that we need to develop “the capacity of revolutionary action to enlarge our hope.”

This won’t do. Booth’s original article blatantly endorses the actions of the Aum and the Oklahoma bombers. We are told “they had the right idea.” To this we can only echo the comments of Larry O’Hara, Dave Black and Michel Prigent that the Oklahoma bombing was “fascist mass murder” and that “we have as little sympathy (zero) for those carrying out a sarin attack on the Tokyo underground as we would anybody carrying out a similar attack on the Newcastle Metro or London Underground.” In his initial article, Booth contends that “The question is asked “What about the innocent people?” How can anyone inside the Fuhrerbunker be innocent?... Why should Joe and Edna Couch Potato derive any benefit from what the Irrationalists do? They can either join in somewhere, or fuck off and die, it’s up to them, it’s up to you.” For Booth, the enemy is not any longer capitalism, technology, or (whatever the fuck it means) “The Machine” — it is anyone who doesn’t embrace his particular view of the world, or his particular Utopia as an alternative. Some alarm bells should now be ringing for those familiar with the history of “Green Anarchist”. GA’s original editor, Richard Hunt, now edits a fascist, misanthropic rag called “Alternative Green”. Booth appears to be following a similar trajectory.

So, is it that everyone who gets involved in the GA collective develops a personality disorder or is there something at the heart of the “anarcho-primitivist” project that engenders the rot?

Whenever the “primitivists” are pushed to define their agenda in comprehensible terms, we are told that “there’s no blue print, no proscriptive pattern.” The closest we get to a point is the US journal *Anarchy*’s statement that they aim for a future that is “radically co-operative and communitarian, ecological and feminist, sponta-

neous and wild.” *Fifth Estate* churn out mystical babble about “an emerging synthesis of post-modern anarchy and the primitive (in the sense of original) Earth based ecstatic vision”. In his “Primitivist Primer”, GA’s John Moore endorses this definition. Primitivism, so far as anything about it is clear, looks back to the primitive communism of hunter-gatherer societies as an alternative to the “multiplicity of power relations” of “civilisation.” All of which is fine, as far as it goes. Even the US science writer Carl Sagan, in his book “Billions and Billions” states that hunter gatherer existence was more democratic and egalitarian than contemporary society, and writers as diverse as Engels, Levi-Strauss and Maurice Godelier have articulated an anthropology of primitive communism. The problem for contemporary primitivists is not whether such societies were “better” than our own, but how their legacy can be incorporated in a politics of the here and now.

We live in a society that edges ever closer to the brink of ecological destruction. Capitalism sees Nature as one more commodity. As the US writer Michael Parenti puts it, the “capital accumulation process wreaks havoc upon the global ecological system... An ever expanding capitalism and a fragile, finite ecology are on a calamitous collision course. It is not true that the ruling politico-economic interests are in a state of denial about this. Far worse than denial, they are in a state of utter antagonism towards those who think the planet is more important than corporate profits.” The problem for the primitivists is that their politics leave them unable to effectively resist.

Primitivism abandons any notion of a class-based analysis of the structures of “control, coercion, domination and exploitation” and replaces them with a rejection of “civilisation” and an idealisation of a period of history superseded by the development of agriculture, and the relations and means of production which have led us to our present state. The problem is — you can’t wish such developments away, or wind the historical clock back. The primitivist project fails on two counts. The first is the question of agency. Ev-

ery social transformation — from feudalism, to the bourgeois revolutions, has been based upon the material interests of a particular class, who act as conscious agents of transformation. The primitivists have not been able to identify any positive agent for the “destruction of civilisation” and so their politics becomes a counsel of despair. As GA concede, it is this despair which is at the root of Booth’s “Irrationalist” tantrums. What they fail to concede is that such despair is fundamental to the hopelessness engendered by their politics in and of itself. With no rational agent for primitivist change, GA are left with the Utopian babble of “One day soon, very soon, the whole system will perish in flames, and where will your designer clothes and Mercedes 450SLs be then?” and the Aum and the Oklahoma fascists as vehicles for “the absolute physical destruction of the machine”.

Moreover, even if a positive vehicle for the primitivist project could be found, should we then embrace it as a viable alternative to the immiseration of millions under the rule of capital? In his book, “Beyond Bookchin”, David Watson, of *Fifth Estate*, argues that aboriginal society represents a viable Utopia. He quotes favourably the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins; “We are inclined to think of hunters and gatherers as poor because they don’t have anything, perhaps better to think of them for that reason as free.” (Perhaps, then, Watson, in the relative comfort of the middle class anarchist scene in Detroit, envies the “freedom” enjoyed by the 1.5 million currently starving to death in the Sudan?) He tells us that aboriginal societies are in reality “affluent” because “everyone starves or no-one does.” What a miserable vision the primitivists — even at their most reasoned — are trying to hawk — at a time when the wealth produced under capitalism is sufficient to eliminate want, at a time when radical ecologists are engaged in a battle for planned, environmentally sustainable production in the interests of and under the control of those currently at the bottom of the production process, all the primitivists have on offer is the communism of want!

It is our contention that the nature of the primitivist project is such that the “irrationalisms” of Steve Booth are, within the context of GA’s project, perfectly rational; that the GA project results in, faced with the age old choice of socialism or barbarism, the election of barbarism as the chosen alternative.

Booth contends that “Only the ability of a given group to create facts really counts. 11 million people not paying poll tax. That was something. The Oklahoma bombing. Unless you can create facts, you are nothing.” Booth is fond of sending out “propositions” to his opponents. We have a few for him (and it would be nice to get a straight answer, instead of the usual thought disordered rant). If the Oklahoma bombing “creates facts”, does also the election of the FN in France or their equivalents in Austria and Germany? If the Aum got it right — if Joe and Edna Couch Potato don’t count — if “the only question could then be — so where was your bomb and why did it not go off first” would Booth endorse, say, the fascist bombing of Bologna railway station, or a far right militia using poison gas on a black community in the US? If not, following your own logic, why not? Go on surprise us; give us a considered reply.