

"Hakim Bey," postmodern "anarchist"

By John Zerzan

I've been getting increasingly annoyed by the word-salad posturing of Bey and find "Primitives & Extropians" one of the weaker offerings yet from this postmodern liberal. I will confine myself to some of the stand-out dopiness from what is shot through with inaccuracies, evasions, pontificating, ego- stroking, and shallowness.

On the level of content "Primitives & Extropians" is little short of absurd. He pitches his piece, most basically, as a comparison of two viewpoints, "two anarchist tendencies." But how even the most air-headed could make the extreme techno- fascist imperialism of extropy into an "anarchist" tendency is quite beyond me. In fact, it worships every high-tech manifestation of the total mastery of nature and the obliteration of every trace of the sensual, autonomous individual. To quote from one of its priests, Carnegie-Mellon's Hans Moravec, "The final frontier will be urbanized, ultimately into an arena where every bit of activity is a meaningful computation: the inhabited portion of the universe will be transformed into a cyberspace ... We might then be tempted to replace some of our innermost mental processes with more cyberspace - appropriate programs purchased from Artificial Intelligence, and so, bit by bit, transform ourselves into something like them. Ultimately our thinking procedures could be totally liberated from any traces of our original body, indeed of any body." (Extropy, #10, 1993). To term something so viciously evil "anarchist" suggests stupidity compounded by bad faith.

Bey's method is as appalling as his claims to truthfulness, and essentially conforms to textbook postmodernism. Aestheticism plus knownothingism is the pm formula; cynical as to the possibility of meaning, allergic to analysis, hooked on trendy word-play, "Primitives & Extropians" displays these features exquisitely.

A point of view that tries to be consistent, well- researched, tentative exploration is deemed absolutist, rigid, aggressive, the product of a "presumptive vanguard of the pure." Bey, however, is inconsistent, messy,

open, impure, non-exclusive, etc. He elevates diversity, the multiplicity of situations, the refusal of the world to conform to simple formulations. What is galling is how stark and even nightmarish our situation really is, hip verbiage aside. Frederic Jameson put it ably in his *Seeds of Time* (1994): "How is it possible for the most standardized and uniform social reality in history. by the merest ideological flick of the thumbnail ... to reemerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and of the unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom?"

Bey completely buys into the pm illusion that society is too "complex" to yield to any profound indictment. A further unveiling of our trendy author reveals a liberal, whose "utopian" future might well include, he discloses, "wrangling about 'acceptable emission standards' or forest preservation." Further, the "human (animal/animate) scaling of economy and technology -- this, however untidy, I would call utopia." How basically reformist! It is little wonder that Bey opens this whole mess of an article by declaring that "the anarcho-primitivists have backed themselves into a situation where they can never be satisfied without the total dissolution of the totality."

A liberal like Bey has really no quarrel with the totality, whereas I foolishly have thought that the threshold definition of a radical, of one who yearns for a qualitative break with the whole deranged setup, is precisely dissatisfaction with the totality.

More than half of this pathetic exercise is Bey peddling his patented Temporary Autonomous Zone prescription. The TAZ "seems to be the only manifestation of the possibility of radical conviviality," is bigger than "mere ideas," is able to "reconcile the wilderness and cyberspace ... in fact, has already done so." Reads to me like it is Bey who advances his candidacy for Absolute Rightness, not those who seek, in an anti-ideological and visionary spirit, to learn from our origins and identify the basics, in reality, of our deep imprisonment. Liberatory analysis and practice have, I would say, far better chances for success from clear thinking and unlimited desire than from stylistic mantras about the glories of inconsistency and hip-sounding, three-word solutions in

capital letters.

P.S. Thanks to John Filiss for the considerable Extropy literature he provided me.