

# NEANDERTHALS IN PLATO'S CAVE

## *A Relativistic Approach to Cultural Evolution*

### BOOK REVIEW

I will try to briefly summarize the core of Steiner's theory:

In biological evolution, there is a tension between specialization and autonomy; that is, between becoming either very highly adapted to one particular biological niche or remaining less specifically adapted but more flexible. Species that take the "specialization" route tend to be more aggressive and hierarchical; they are also more susceptible to extinction when sudden shifts in the environment occur. In contrast, species that evolve towards autonomy tend to preserve more of their childlike qualities into adulthood (a phenomenon called "neoteny"). An example can be seen in the contrast between the more aggressive, hierarchical chimpanzees compared to the very closely related but more social, playful, and egalitarian bonobos.

Humans are arguably the least specialized, most neotonous of all species and have evolved the furthest along the evolutionary line of autonomy. What we gave up in specialized adaptation to a particular biological niche, we made up for with the invention of culture. Culture (which for the first few hundreds of thousands of years was always of the hunter-gatherer type) allows us to survive in a huge variety of environments while still preserving our biological adaptability and autonomy. But within the world of human culture, the same tension between specialization and autonomy exists. Specialization in this case means becoming overly dependent on and subservient to specific cultural forms and technologies - i.e., humans becoming mere "cogs in the machine" - as we see in the civilized world.

As in the biological realm, those who have avoided the pathway of over-specialization in the cultural realm have done so through another kind of neoteny - in this case, the intentional preservation of more "primitive" technologies, beliefs (myths), and forms of social organization. And again, the same highly social, egalitarian qualities are seen in these more neotonous cultures - and they attain a very high - perhaps even supreme - level of autonomy, the ultimate expression of this autonomy being the ability to consciously reflect Reality in its wholeness.

The refusal of hunter-gatherers to become tied to (and therefore enslaved to) highly complex social-technological systems allows them to preserve and fully explore the autonomy given to our species through our biological evolution. In other words (and totally contrary to how civilization teaches us to perceive and think), choosing to remain more primitive in certain areas - as hunter-gatherers (and perhaps some subsistence agriculturalists) do - actually fosters a far more advanced stage of human cultural evolution; and any form of over-specialization (even if it involves super high-tech gizmos, a globalized economy, and an ideology of liberty and democracy) actually represents a lower stage of cultural evolution - because it decreases our actual autonomy. The over-specialization that our species "escaped" in the biological/evolutionary realm has now been recreated by civilization in the cultural realm. It is as if we handed back the great gift given to us as a result of millions of years of evolution and said, "Thanks anyways, but we prefer to be slaves."

Many other writers (Daniel Quinn, Calvin Martin, Paul Shepard, Jean Liedloff, Derrick Jensen, to name a few) have done an excellent job describing the coherence, value, wisdom, etc. of hunter-gatherer lifeways relative to civilization; Steiner's unique contribution as I see it is in presenting possibly the best theoretical framework I've come across for teasing out the over-arching direction of evolution / nature and describing how hunter-gatherer and civilized societies fit in to that picture.

After a second reading and further reflection, I would add that, whereas many other writers compare and contrast hunter-gatherer and civilized lifeways very effectively, Steiner goes a crucial step further and articulates specific universal principles - in terms of autonomy / specialization - underlying these differences. This is, I believe, an essential step towards correcting the problems inherent in civilized life

because it seems likely that only by understanding the underlying principles will we be able to stand free enough of those problems to begin truly resolving them. This seems to be what it means to "transcend" a problem - i.e., to go beyond it - rather than merely trying to fight our way out of our problems even as we remain unknowingly mired in them. In other words, we cannot really "fix" civilization; and "revolution" is not the answer either. We need to clearly understand what civilization is - from a perspective that is free of its limiting perspective - and then go beyond it. I would say Steiner is laying groundwork for this.

—**John Zerzan**  
author of *Future Primitive*