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Beyond the Symbolic and towards the Collapse

2008

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1. Beyond the Symbolic

John Zerzan is one of the most interesting contemporary thinkers in the United States, at least. Like everything else in life, in order to fully appreciate Zerzan's contribution to epistemology or the philosophy of civilization, first, one has to read his work and hear his conferences — for, here, I only present my personal interpretation of his theory — and second, consider the context through which his voice and energy resonate. His contribution becomes even more impressive in light of the processes of Western institutionalization of Thought and commodification of Knowledge — a totalitarian context that tolerates no challenge (philosophical or otherwise) that would threaten "the American way of life".

The notion that there is an "American way of life" is not new. It appears with the colonization and the extermination of aboriginal cultures and life in the Americas. Already in the 17th century, American writers and politicians used the expression to designate their justification for killing and de-territorializing the native human and non-human populations because the colonialists believed in their "inalienable" right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" at the expense of forced labor and other people's life, liberty and pursuit of happiness — a stance fully revealed with slavery, feudalism and now with underpaid, forced wage-labor in the supposedly "post"-industrial economy. Zerzan traces the roots of this cultural system to the logic and practice of domestication and agriculture, i.e. Civilization, whose motor was set in motion by abstraction (language) and symbolic thought.

At the basis of this Civilized worldview is the idea that those who exploit deserve their fortune which in itself justifies them even when there exists extensive documentation that their wealth — hereditary or "earned" — comes through the rape and pillaging of others (for example, what were the first "scandals" we heard of from Iraq and Afghanistan in our own century if not those of rape and humiliation of prisoners of war and the pillaging of museums whose artifacts surfaced on eBay in Europe and America?).

Rape functions on, both, the symbolic and the real planes. Religion and science, funded and constructed by those who concentrate power and control in their hands, morally and scientifically absolve the rulers and the religious, cultural, and scientific elites from guilt. Those who are forced to labor for the abusive and unjust wages are depicted by civilization as a troublesome burden, morally and physiologically handicapped, who deserve their lot. The abused, in turn, take this very abuse to justify their own participation in the abuse of others. So, everyone is a victim and everyone is absolved.

Anyone who seriously challenges this position or refuses to collaborate is exterminated: the example of the Aborigines, the "Communists", the "Islamists",

the "terrorists", the "wild" animals, the extensive mawing of grass and plants, deforestation, etc. We have heard the call to defend Civilization — as in the case of *"la Civilisation Française"* and its brutal treatment of the African "savages", for example, or the "American way of life", as another illustration of violence against "others" — throughout "history" (as Cabral demonstrates, history is the European body of "moral" justifications of conquest and anything that falls outside that time and logic frame is considered to be outside of history) and up to the 21st century, when the North American and European governments bombed people in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

In his critique, though, Zerzan goes beyond the linguistic simplifications and the rhetoric of the symbolic: it doesn't matter whether we call it the "American way", "Civilization" (such as the French, the English, the Roman or the European), the Arab Empire, the Chinese Civilization, etc. These are structures of the same machine, where a certain human population has acquired great power by having imposed on other humans and non-humans the symbolic abstraction and thus ruptured them from the natural world: the earth, the sea, and the skies. The civilized societies have violence and war as the basic code in the language of their program with an implicit drive towards stratification and machines.

Whether two thousand years ago or today, participants in the construction of the "scientific" and "ethical" or "religious" theories (i.e. the construction of knowledge that justifies and rationalizes violence, property, and guilt, with the three spheres serving as different parts of the same machine called "civilization") are chosen carefully and those who threaten the "theory" are executed by different means, sometimes by being forced to capitulate and work for the System or starve to death with no access to intellectual or nutritional resources. If a person cannot live and (pro)create in harmony with self-image and a personal meaning in the natural and social world, that person, that thinker, dies. If an author is coerced to write and research what she believes is wanted of her by public, market, or scientific opinion and demand, the thinker ceases to exist and what we get is a docile executor of civilization, a paraphraser, a bureaucrat.

Today, in the age of the Internet, university portals with scientific journals and resources can be accessed ONLY by admitted students or faculty (the chosen few) — one needs a pin number and a special code that is being changed every 6 months in order to block the people — citizens or not — from accessing the knowledge which the state claims to be ordered, "sponsored", and constructed for the sake of "society" with some assemblers (also known as "scientists") receiving "grants" and "salaries", while others left to starve, forced to drop-out, or dismissed from the Temple of Knowledge.

Thus, the totalitarian institution of knowledge forces scientists to either choose the ranks of the "courtly" philosopher-jesters — Slavoj Žižek epitomizes the ideal

towards which "intellectuals" are herded — or forces the thinkers to concentrate on survival, which, in the capitalist "distribution" (rather, the lack of distribution) of space and resources, strangles the non-academic thinker who rebels against the Institution and dares to dream of other possibilities to live and seek the truth. Ultimately, the truth begins with ourselves and the question is: how do we see our own purpose in relation to the purpose of the world, even the universe? It is this question that leads us to the various constructs of the notions of nature and natureness, honesty and truth.

John Zerzan's existence as a person and thinker, thus, becomes doubly impressive. And his pithy, uncompromising clarity in articulating a most compelling critique of civilization and the roots of violence is, at once, powerful and erudite, in spite of his admission that violence is inherent to language itself.

Zerzan traces the roots of violence to the symbolic, because, he says, the symbolic tears away the human from the real world and imposes abstraction as "reality", which demands submission and coerces people into accepting the denigrating conditions of suffering as salvation, replacing the happiness felt with the experience of natural reality in a natural world. At its core, the symbolic contains the implicit direction towards domestication and, thus, civilization, which relies on violence (coercion and war) in order to submit people to its abstract, unreal logic.

At a recent moment in history, some societies chose to organize themselves into cities and empires that depended on immense structures of coerced labor and domesticated land, animals, and people in order to feed the cities and their structures. Abstract deities, religion and science, thus, became necessary tools in the civilizations of Asia, the Near East (he includes the Hellenic civilisation here) and later the European empires and their extensions in Australia and the Americas. In this respect, Zerzan goes beyond the polemic dichotomies of criticizing the "American way of life" as interpreted by the governing structures along with its wheels of violence, such as the defense of these same values by the Ku Klux Klan whose influence extended throughout the political and social spectrum, from top government officials to organized lynching bands in the countryside.

The notions of equality and the pursuit of happiness at the core of the slogans of the American, French or other nation-state revolutions, now sung as the hymn of Civilization, are used in an extremely narrow sense, where the suffering of the disempowered and the dispossessed is real while their powerful managers and owners (the owners of companies differ only in symbolic details from the owners of slaves and serfs) hide behind the "symbolic", when we all know that the enjoyment of the fruits of the system of injustice is very real and this right for enjoyment is protected by a whole code of laws. Zerzan's analysis reveals

that the definition of property, equality, and rights becomes a vital part of the technology of control.

In this "civilized" context, justice does not mean equality — because equality is called evil, communist propaganda that threatens civilization, or even worse than communist, it may be anarchist — justice, with all its legislative and judicial apparatus for the civilized means that people have the right and are free to co-exist in inequality and have NO right and are NOT free to refuse to co-exist in inequality, where some have lived for generations as owners who have successfully pursued and amassed material and symbolic happiness transmitting it through hereditary "laws", while others have existed for generations in a state of alienation from people and the world, in deprivation of the natural, being denied their rightful access to resources that are now "privatized" by the elites, and, most important, where the dispossessed themselves embody someone else's assets, usually referred to as "human resources".

In other words, Civilization, despite its claim to have suppressed the wild, has forged a world of social relations akin to those of predators and prey but with the difference that in the wild, the prey has a chance to escape and the murder is never massive or exterminating, while in society, domestication and machines ensure that the prey has no option, no choice, no chance for survival for its own sake and meaning and not as private property of the predator. Control over nature out there and inside the human being necessitates the domestication of the processes of life and death. Hence, the intensive investment of resources into genetic and astrophysical sciences or mathematics comes as no surprise.

Again, to take Zerzan's point on domestication, civilization imposes the idea of the right of the prey to accept to exist in a domesticated society where it agrees for the predator to use it as wished, with the whole "human rights" apparatus being concerned with the placement of these resources, recycling and managing them, in the most profitable manner for the System — I've never heard of Ethiopian or Somali refugees being invited to live in Buckingham palace and enjoying the good life of the English royalty or being placed with the Swedish royal family — but I've heard serious talk by Swedish government officials, for example, about starting camel farms in Sweden to make the Somalis useful (obviously for the Swedes) and since that's what they, supposedly, know best and love doing anyway. This logic is what runs the machine of science, knowledge, and the culture of Civilization.

Zerzan had a brush with academia, but succeeded to earn his independence from the System. In other words, the depth and honesty of Zerzan's analysis goes beyond the safe borderline at which institutional thinkers, such as Chomsky or Foucault (just to name a few), stop, which is to acknowledge their own participation in the chain of the distribution — or again, rather, the lack of distribution — of resources. He does not hide behind the symbolic titles of academia with its

structures that veil the violence of academic income. Instead, he challenges this knowledge and reveals how the position of Western "statism" and the structure of nation states that allow to parasite off their "own" peoples and the peoples of "other" organized entities is by default fatal.

Technology plays a role in the organization of a system of surveillance and the exploitation of natural and human resources, which, I believe, only appears to be complex because, by its very nature, conquest needs to overpower; it needs to curb and categorize. Since we all know that the human form of life is only one element among the infinite in nature and the scope of the universe, then anything that can be overpowered and controlled by this singular element has to be rendered weaker and simpler than itself. Victory over "resources" can come only at the expense of weakening the "opponent", rendering 'it' simpler and more primitive than the self, even when that self claims to have been molded in the image of God. In other words, the human can achieve control only over what it has overpowered, overwhelmed and simplified. In fact, classification is simplification that ignores difference and diversity and lumps together according to some specific characteristics: e.g. mammals, humans, gases, etc.. The vaster the domain of control, the simpler the categories of classification, objectification and conquest must become; the more entities enter the categories, the more profitable the system of control. Edward Said illustrates the violence of this exercise in his examination of how Europe had created the category of Oriental.

I also see the splintering of the civilized society into professionalism and disciplines as part of the technology of discipline and control that gives the illusion of complexity whereas, in reality, by its own logic it tends to simplify starting with the basic and simplistic stance of civilization: to appropriate and control. Hence, the various "postmodernist" disciplines and professions only appear to be splintered and unrelated, in reality, they all stem from the humanist platform of conquest of the world for the benefit of some people. Civilization and control, thus, always move towards simplification, even as the levels of the machine appear to become more complex by the shear amounts and numbers that enter the sphere of capitalist domination. The film *Idiocracy* makes a splendid point on the 'progress' of the machine and the debilized future. The necessity to, as John Taylor Gatto says, dumb down in schools is the only successful device to achieve control.

According to Zerzan, the collapse of this system is implicit in its own logic and epistemology, moving towards the inevitable doom, programmed by its own symbolism that kills life and gallops towards the ultimate void.

2. The Collapse

Yet, in my understanding, Zerzan is not a pessimist, even if he is a realist and sees that the technological program is lethal, he says that it is possible to avoid the collapse and tragedy. The happy outcome, however, depends on people making the only right choice: stop the trajectory that is determined by someone's desire to completely conquer and exploit nature — both: nature as the world and the inner nature of the human being as part of that world — in other words, overcome alienation and return to what anthropologist Tim Ingold describes as dwelling in the world.

When reading/listening to Zerzan, we should keep in mind that since language itself is part of the problem that abstracts our direct and holistic experience, there is a need for us to go beyond the specific terminology and embrace the interlocutor in an atmosphere of sincerity and goodwill, the essential factors of mutual understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, harmony. In this respect, I was highly surprised by the comments voiced at the conferences.

I can understand how some people would disagree with the call to the "primitive", because they count on the technological solution to help them colonize other planets and galaxies. Yes, science and technology might be able to save the elite and so it becomes important for them to successfully control the resources and science and develop the system with its unjust distribution of food, water and space even when this structure depends on war and the final war would bring the end to this world — hence, the necessity of religious creation of symbolism of the sacrifice, which Zerzan analyses in his work, particularly in his last book, the *Twilight of the Machines* (2008). Christian Zionists are one such group. Technocratic capitalists are another. But we all know that the percentage of the "chosen" ones is dismal and that the majority is designated, by the technophiles and the capitalist elites, for peril.

Another scenario is that the scientific warfare with the resulting natural catastrophes (nuclear testing in the oceans, nuclear pollution on a global scale, the tons of bombs dropped on Baghdad that shook the earth in quakes along specific seismic lines and continues to this day, the ecological and geological disaster caused by extracting fuels and energy, etc.) is seen as the "natural" regulation of "human population" — à la Malthus and the whole English, Nazi or other scientific determinism. Again, the religious and scientific symbolism of the sacrifice is highly useful for this group as well.

Yet, Zerzan reminds us that we are capable of overcoming symbolism and embracing that which civilization, pejoratively, refers to as the primitive.

While, personally, I believe that the quotas, political correctness policies, or the feminist and Négritude attempts to "reclaim" and "recharge" terminology fail

to achieve a dynamic shift in consciousness and I would prefer the term "wild" to "primitive", I see Zerzan going beyond the claims of "embracing" the "primitive" as a linguistic device. After all, it is he who, in the first place, has criticized the limitations of language and its tendency for abstraction and violence. So, who cares what terms we use, as long as we understand what we are talking about. Most important is that Zerzan invites us to dare and embrace complexity and enter into a spiritual experience with nature, the self, the earth, the universe, with all the known and the unknowable, the weaker than us and the overwhelming. He sees us capable of demonstrating nobility by acknowledging that we can never control the complexity of the universe and that the healing powers of cosmos will simply annihilate the disease, unless we choose to heal from our fear, greed, impotence, megalomania and the obsessive drive for domestication/control.

In this limited and limiting tool (he has never denounced tools; he criticized technology and domestication), our medium of (mis)communication — which is language — Zerzan presents tons of convincing anthropological research that shows that the "primitive" has lived happy, interesting, intelligent and healthy lives for millions of years, while Civilization succeeded to bring ALL life to the brink of extinction in a few thousand years. He argues that, in light of this compelling evidence, it is the "primitive" that can liberate us from the grip of the Machine we hail as Civilization. Only then, will we have a chance to shift our consciousness from alienation to true spirituality and the celebration of Life.

Deaf to what Zerzan means when he talks about the collapse, some of the questions at the conferences accused him of "wanting the death of the millions of people who will die when the system collapses" and of being a privileged white male. When I hear such sheepy following of what "someone has said about someone who said something about what they thought that John Zerzan had said", I become utterly pessimistic about any possibility to save the future.

For, it is not Zerzan who has invented the Machine with its terminology and the technological solution that made the atomic bomb possible as THE option, leaving no possibility for life outside of the "Atomic way of life" under the constant threat of obliteration (and, actual death; let us not forget Baghdad, Serbia, Hiroshima, Nagasaki). And it is not Zerzan who has welcomed the extermination of millions of people around the world under the aegis of the defense of the Civilized way of life (slavery, colonialism, the war of terror on terror, etc.). Those who are worried about the collapse of their system, close their eyes on, and hence participate in, the continuing extinction of human and, what Zerzan calls, plant and animal communities around the world whose collapse this civilization has impelled. Perhaps, the speakers, still fail to perceive the millions of already dead and still dying as "people" or as complex entities of a complex system that exists for its own right and not for the sake of being domesticated (appropriated and exploited)

by some humans. Instead, in fearing the onslaught of their own collapse, these people see the "other" victims of civilization as "resources", the necessary collateral damage needed to regulate the smooth flow of food to the fridges, restaurants and cafés of the speakers — what Malthus called the disasters necessary to regulate "their" (the brown people's) "overpopulation" and not "our" (civilized) voracious appetites.

Being a white male, Zerzan has renounced the privileges of the white male system and his biography is a witness to that fact. While, of course, there is a difference between someone renouncing having had a choice in the first place and someone not having a chance to renounce because the System never extended an invitation to the Bacchanalia of Civilization, it is still an excellent example for those in the position of privilege to follow. Which, of course, hardly ever the privileged do, since they greatly fear their own demise even though for others this collapse has long occurred. But then, Zerzan warns us that the symbolic alienates people from the suffering of others and replaces our ability for empathy and experience with concentration on personal salvation. In its imposition of a virtual reality, Civilization estranges us from our own pain and, ultimately, by killing the Other the civilized kill the Self.

The other side of the question, though, is that many of those who do not even have a chance at privilege, gobble up the whole value system and ensure that by their simple desire to "one day get there" ("there" is of course the ultimate abstraction) run the system to its logical end: the Total Collapse, the Apocalypse — that elitist knowledge and desire that will blow up the rest of the world. Some of the so-called "anarchists" at the fair seem to fall in this category: they do not associate themselves with the capitalist elites, they identify themselves as anarchists and yet scream in fear that it is Zerzan — and not those who order and finance Knowledge and technologies — who is going to take away their cosy computers, tasty bakeries, black uniforms, contraceptives and the medical establishment that makes their abortions and sex change operations, and the like.

In other words, they are deaf to the fact that it is this Knowledge with its implicit and inherent logic that has killed off thousands of varieties of animal, plant, and human cultures around the world. When they scream that the collapse will kill millions of people, they obviously exclude all the Africans, Asians, Aborigines who have already been killed and continue to perish around the world. This logic, obviously, excludes these people from the category itself of "people" and we find ourselves facing the elitist eugenicist rhetoric, once again.

When I voiced this concern during the last workshop, a woman responded to my comment with the cultural relativist jargon that veils the truth of murder: "you are the racist," she said, "because the Africans, Aborigines, and the Asians have great cultures".

Here, I realized that this statement, like the rest of "relativist" rationale, is used to gloss over the intentional genocide by the culture of greed and megalomaniac need for the feeling/illusion of agency in a domesticated (i.e. disempowered) society, where control becomes possible only over the one rendered weaker and whose life and death are in the hands of the tamer who appropriates the decision to extinguish that life or let it be. The relativist cultural jargon in this context means:

"those people have their own great cultures because we are tolerant of them and we have our technologies".

It is of course "our" agency that we are concerned with and "their" existence owes to our will; also these "agents" fail to work out the logic to its end: our appetite and greed kills off those people and their environments, because technologies depend on the exploitation of human and geophysical resources: it is the peasants who grew our food, the miners who brought us metal and light, the blacks of South Africa who dug out our diamonds and coal.

A good example is the documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare* that shows how the native communities around Lake Victoria in Tanzania are devastated, dying or surviving by serving as prostitutes to foreigners, because the complex ecosystem of the lake and its surroundings — after having fed human and non-human life for millions of years — has, in a matter of a few decades, been completely destroyed, since the colonial rule left in Tanzania a structure of control that ensured food and profitable business for "Europe" even after the gourmet consumers went "home". Successful control and exploitation of Tanzanian resources could have been ensured only by simplifying local diversity and curbing Tanzanian possibilities by cutting off the local populations from their surroundings and resources. Simply, introduce the Nile Perch and leave some, previously abused but now having the chance to redeem their income, foreigners in charge, the right kind of government that is "business" oriented and that respects the "advanced" monarchies and democracies — and you have the System of collapse in motion.

The relativist logic continues:

"Yes, once upon a time those brown and black people had their civilizations, and we acknowledge that. Yes, our white ancestors have amassed at the expense of the colored people's pain, but hey, they should stop sulking and feeling victimized, it's time to move on, just don't ask us to give up on what we have amassed and, anyway, today they have a right to either grow our "fair trade" coffee and chocolate and rice and the rest of it and, well, yes, they might be living their quaint little "third world" lives, but then people are different and have different needs — it just so happens that our needs are much more complex and sophisticated; hey, we're civilized, while their needs are modest and simple, and it suits us just fine and it is their choice, which we OF COURSE respect and we shall not tolerate any other

choice, such as them getting appetites like ours. We have the bomb and we'll bomb them if they threaten our bomb and our way of life. But if they're decent and want to, we'll even let them lead their exotic lives, which are still useful to us, for, we can come and look at them or study and observe them, or they can entertain us when we go on our touristic vacations like when we visit the remnants of the animal populations we first made extinct then placed in the few areas that we designated as game parks (i.e. the domesticated "wilderness" of Safari "adventures"). We can make money by taking their pictures and selling the *National Geographic*, or by appropriating and copyrighting their music for our profit (Nick Cage, Peter Gabriel, etc.) We kill for lucrative civil engineer contracts in the brown cities that we've bombed. We receive fat grants for anthropological studies, that allow us to stomp all over their primitive existence with our violent salaries, unequal exchange rates and financial and scientific (i.e. symbolic) institutions that back us and impose our appetite as authority — we get the money, the computers, the food, and the machines and they get to admire us, for we are the symbols of justice and good life, we can teach them and domesticate them with our ever non-satiable demand for transcendence. We kill and consume them, and yet remain forever hungry and scared, bulimic and anorexic as we hoard for the future. Marshall Sahlins says something about the Affluent Society and the Society of Poverty and Fear, but surely, they have a right to their poverty, right? And we have a right to the eternal spectacle of the bloody symbolic?"

Despite its claim to complexity and higher intelligence, the symbolic simplifies people's minds and dulls their critical abilities. The more they get civilized, the more primitive people's outlook becomes; the more "educated" — what the French call *scolarisé* or schooled — the more fearful of loosing the chains and the symbols that replace the possibility of Affluence, which Marshall Sahlins attributes to gatherer societies, with a fixation on poverty as practiced in civilized society. It was particularly interesting that the self-identified anarchist women at the bookfair and the non-partisan "independent" women at the Coop la Maison Verte, voiced the same fear that, even if it so happens that they live in a patriarchal, capitalist society, they said that this society has given them medicalized abortion and the pill, in other words, the knowledge of how to suppress life in order to live well.

Knowledge of life and death has always been available to people in gathering and the nomadic-matriarchal societies albeit from a perspective of harmony rather than domestication, but if this question continuously reappeared as an argument against John Zerzan's interpretation of civilization, it illustrates perfectly his thesis on destruction by Civilization — what I call, the Epistemology of Death.

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Intro to John Zerzan's conferences in Montreal, May 2008