

ENEMY OF THE STATE
an interview with John Zerzan by Derrick Jensen

(note from alex: I have reformatted and corrected typos in this text for the sake of easier reading.
It is also available online at a number of spots, in slightly rougher shape and/or shortened forms.
For texts by John Zerzan and others on Primitivism & Anarchism: www.primitivism.com)

Mention anarchism and most people think of chaos, mayhem, and bomb-throwing. But for author and social critic John Zerzan, anarchism is not about people running wild in the streets. Rather, it's about eradicating all forms of domination. This includes not only the nation-state and the corporation, but also such internalized forms as patriarchy, racism, and homophobia.

Zerzan has been tearing at the underpinnings of our culture for twenty-five years now, but he's best known for his most recent books, *Elements of Refusal* (soon to be reissued by C.A.L. Press) and *Future Primitive* (Autonomedia). He has also published essays on everything from "Why I Hate Star Trek" to "The Failure of Symbolic Thought." In all his writing, he attempts to expose the ways philosophy, religion, economics, and other ideological constructions rationalize domination by making it seem a natural manifestation of Darwinian selection, or God's will, or economic exigency. He encourages us to look at those elements we accept as facts of life and try to see how they, too, facilitate domination. Even more fundamentally, he proposes a relationship between domination and time, number, even language itself.

My conversation with Zerzan, at his home in Eugene, Oregon, was as freeform as I might have expected of a meeting between two anarchists. (Though I call myself an anarchist, I'd never before met one outside the covers of a book.) What I hadn't expected was Zerzan's soft-spoken character. His writing is so sharp, uncompromising, and tenacious that I'd halfway feared he would be as fierce in person as he is on the page. I was pleasantly disappointed: he is one of the most gracious and courteous people I've ever met. I shouldn't have been surprised. Anarchism, as he defines it, is not only the desire to be free of domination, but also the desire not to dominate others.

Julie Mayeda also contributed to this interview.

Has a society ever existed in which relationships weren't based on domination?

That was the human condition for millions of years. It changed only ten thousand years ago, with the invention of agriculture, which led to civilization. Since that time, we have worked hard to convince ourselves that such conditions ever existed, that we must accept repression and subjugation as necessary antidotes to "evil" human nature. According to this school of thought, authority is a benevolent savior that rescued us from our pre-civilized existence of deprivation, brutality, and ignorance. Think about the images that come to mind when you hear the word caveman or Neanderthal. Those images are first implanted in our minds and then invoked to remind us how miserable we would be without religion, government, and toil. In fact, they are probably the biggest ideological justification for the whole of civilization. The problem with those images, of course, is that they are inaccurate. There's been a revolution in the fields of anthropology and archaeology over the past thirty years, and increasingly people are coming to understand that life before agriculture and domestication - of animals and of ourselves - was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, gender equality, and health.

How do we know this?

In part through observing existing foraging peoples - those few we've not yet eliminated - and watching their egalitarian ways disappear under the pressures of habitat destruction and, often, direct coercion or murder. Also, at the other end of the time scale, through interpreting archaeological finds. For example, studying the hearth sites of ancient peoples, we don't find that one site has most of the goods, while the other sites have very few. Rather, time after time we find that all sites have about the same amount of belongings - evidence of a people whose way of life is based on equality and sharing. A third source of knowledge is the accounts of early European explorers, who again and again wrote of the generosity and gentleness of the peoples they encountered, all around the globe.

How do you respond to skeptics who say this is all just "noble savage" nonsense?

I respectfully suggest they read more within the field. This isn't anarchist theory. It's mainstream anthropology and archaeology. There are disagreements about some of the details, but not about the general structure.

But what about headhunters and cannibals?

Considering that our culture invented napalm and nuclear weapons, I'm not sure we're in a position to judge the smaller scale violence of other cultures. But it's important to note that none of the cannibal or headhunting groups were true hunter-gatherers. They had already begun to use agriculture. It is now generally conceded that agriculture usually leads to a rise in labor, a decrease in sharing, an increase in violence, and a shorter life expectancy. This is not to say that all agricultural societies are violent, but rather that violence is by and large not characteristic of true hunter-gatherers.

If things were so great before, then why did agriculture begin?

That's a difficult question, one that's long been a source of frustration for anthropologists and archeologists. For many hundreds of thousands of years - the whole Lower and Middle Paleolithic - there was little change. Then suddenly, in the Upper Paleolithic, there's this explosion, seemingly out of nowhere: all at once there is art, and, on the heels of that, agriculture, then religion.

Some have theorized that the sudden change was due to a growth in intelligence, but we now know that human intelligence a million years ago was equal to what it is today. A recent piece in Nature magazine, for example, suggests that humans have been sailing and navigating around Micronesia, a widespread group of tiny Pacific islands, for some eight hundred thousand years. So the reason civilization didn't arise earlier had nothing to do with intelligence. The intelligence theory has always been a comforting and racist rationalization, anyway: comforting because it implies that anyone intelligent enough will necessarily build a lifestyle like ours, and racist because it implies that those humans who live primitive lifestyles today are simply too stupid to do otherwise. If they were just smart enough, the reasoning goes, they would invent asphalt, chain saws, and penitentiaries.

We also know that the transitions to agriculture didn't come in response to population pressures. Population has always been another big puzzle: how did foragers keep their populations so low when they didn't have birth-control technologies? Historically, it's been assumed they used infanticide, but that theory has been called into question. I believe that, in addition to using various plants as contraceptives, they were also much more in tune with their bodies.

So why was the human way of life stable for so long, and why did it change so quickly?

I think it was stable because it worked, and I don't think it changed entirely at once. For many millennia there was, perhaps, a slow slippage into division of labor. It would have to have happened so slowly - almost imperceptibly - that people didn't see what they were in danger of losing. The alienation brought about by division of labor - alienation from each other, from the natural world, from our bodies - eventually reached critical mass, giving sudden rise to what we call civilization. As to how civilization itself took hold, I think Sigmund Freud got it right when he said, "Civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means of power and coercion." We see this happening today, and there's no reason to believe it was any different at the start.

What's wrong with division of labor?

If your primary goal in life is mass production, then nothing at all. Division of labor is central to our way of life. Each person must perform as a tiny cog in a big machine. If, on the other hand, your primary goal is wholeness, egalitarianism, autonomy, and an intact world, then there's quite a lot wrong with it.

Division of labor is generally seen - when it is noticed at all - as a "given" of modern life. All that we see around us would be completely impossible without it. And that's the trouble: undoing the mess civilization has made will mean undoing division of labor.

I think that, at base, a person is not complete or free insofar as that person's life depends on his or her being just some aspect of a process, some fraction of it. A divided life mirrors the basic divisions in society. Hierarchy, alienation - it all starts there. I don't think anyone would deny that specialists and experts exert effective control in the contemporary world, or that this control is increasing with ever-greater acceleration.

Such as in food production. Every year, fewer corporations control a greater percentage of our food resources. This is possible only because so many of us don't know how to raise our own food.

And it's not just food. Not too long ago, you could make your own radio set. People did it all the time. Ten years ago, you could still work on your own car, but even that's becoming increasingly difficult. So we become more and more hostage to people with specialized skills, and to people who control specialized technologies. When you have to rely too much on others, when you don't have the skills to do what's needed on a day-to-day basis, you are diminished.

But isn't it necessary for us to rely on each other?

Of course. The goal of anarchism is not to turn people into islands with no connection to others - quite the opposite. But it's important to understand the difference between the healthy interdependence of a functioning community and the one-way dependence of relying on others with specialized skills for your most basic needs. In the latter case, the specialists have power over you. Whether they are "benevolent" is beside the point. To stay in control, those who have specialized skills must guard and mystify those skills. The idea is that, without specialists, you'd be completely lost; you wouldn't know how to do the simplest thing, such as feed yourself. Well, humans have been feeding themselves for the past couple of million years, and doing it a lot more successfully and efficiently than we do now. The global food system is insane, inhumane, and inefficient. We destroy the world with pesticides, herbicides, and fossil-fuel emissions, and still billions of people go their entire lives never having enough to eat. Yet few things are simpler than growing or gathering your own food.

I interviewed a member of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, the group that last year took over the Japanese ambassador's house in Peru. I asked him what his movement wanted. He replied, "We want to grow and distribute our own food. We already know how to do it; we merely need to be allowed to do so."

Exactly.

In your writing, you've proposed a relationship between time and domination.

Time is an invention of culture. It has no existence outside of culture. The degree to which a culture is ruled by time is a pretty exact measure of its alienation. Look at us. Everything in our lives is measured by time. Time has never been as palpable, as material as it is now.

The tick, tick, tick, of a clock is just about as tangible as you can get.

Yes, it makes time concrete; it reifies it. Reification is when an abstract concept is treated as a material thing. A second of time is nothing, and to grant it independent existence runs counter to our experience of life. Anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl wrote: "Our idea of time seems to be a natural attribute of the human mind, but that is a delusion. Such an idea scarcely exists where primitive mentality is concerned."

"Primitive" people live in the present, as we all do when we're having fun. It has been said that the Mbuti of southern Africa believe that "by a correct fulfillment of the present, the past and the future will take care of themselves." For the North American Pawnee, life has a rhythm but not a progression. Primitive peoples generally have no interest in birthdays or measuring their ages. As for the future, they have little desire to control what does not yet exist, just as they have little desire to control nature. They keep track of the seasons, but this in no way robs them of the present. This point of view is hard for us to grasp, because the notion of time has been so deeply imbedded that it's nearly impossible to imagine it not existing.

So you're talking about more than just not counting seconds.

I'm talking about time not existing. Time as a continuing thread that unravels in an endless progression, linking all events together while remaining independent of them - that doesn't exist. Sequence exists. Rhythm exists. But not time. This reification of time is related to the notion of mass production and division of labor. Tick, tick, tick, as you said: Identical seconds. Identical people. Identical chores repeated endlessly. But when you realize that no two occurrences are identical, and that each moment is different from the moment before, time simply disappears. If events are always novel, then not only is routine impossible, but the notion of time is meaningless.

And the opposite would be true as well.

Exactly. Without the imposition of time, we can't impose routine. Freud repeatedly pointed out that in order for civilization to take hold, it first had to break the early hold of timeless and nonproductive gratification. This happened, I believe, in two stages. First, the rise of agriculture magnified the importance of time specifically, cyclical time, with its periods of intense labor associated with sowing or reaping, and with the surplus of the harvest allocated to the priests who kept the calendars. This was true of the Babylonians and Mayans. Then, with the rise of civilization, cyclical time which at least gave a nod toward the natural world, with its connection to the rhythms of the seasons gave way to linear time. Once you have linear time, you have history, then Progress, then idolatry of the future. Now we're prepared to sacrifice species, cultures, and quite possibly the entire natural world on the altar of some imagined future. Once, it was at least a utopian future, but as a society we don't even have that to believe in anymore.

The same transformation occurs in our personal lives; we give up living in the moment in the hope of being happy at some point in the future -- perhaps after we retire, or maybe even after we die and go to heaven. The emphasis on heaven itself emerges from the unpleasantness of living in linear time.

It seems to me that linear time not only leads to habitat degradation, but also springs from it. When I was young, there were many frogs. Now there are fewer. There were many songbirds. Now there are fewer. That's linear time.

Yes, and with the introduction of the clock, linear time was transformed into mechanical time. The Christian Church was central to this endeavor. The Benedictines, who ruled forty thousand monasteries at their height in the Middle Ages, helped yoke human endeavor to the unnatural collective rhythm of the machine by forcing people to work "on the clock." The fourteenth century saw the first public clocks, as well as the division of hours into minutes and minutes into seconds.

At every step of the way, however, time has been met with resistance. In France's July Revolution of 1830, for example, people all across Paris began spontaneously to shoot at public clocks. In the 1960s, many people (including me) quit wearing watches. Even today, children must be broken of their resistance to time. This was one of the primary reasons for the imposition of a mandatory school system on a largely unwilling public: school teaches you to be at a certain place at a certain time, and thus prepares you for life on the job. Raoul Vaneigem, member of the radical group Situationist International, has a wonderful quote about this: "The child's days escape adult time; their time is swollen by subjectivity, passion, dreams haunted by reality. Outside, the educators look on, waiting, watch in hand, till the child joins and fits the cycle of the hours."

You've also said that numbers themselves alienate us.

When members of a large family sit down to dinner, they know immediately, without counting, whether someone is missing. Counting becomes necessary only when things become homogenized. Not all peoples use number systems. The Yanomamo, for example, do not count past two. Obviously, they are not too stupid to count further; they simply have a different relationship with the world.

The first number system was almost undoubtedly developed to count domesticated animals, as wild creatures were enslaved and harvested. We next see mathematics being used in Sumer about five thousand years ago, to facilitate business. Later, Euclid developed geometry literally, "land measuring" to measure fields for purposes of ownership, taxation, and the assignment of slave labor. Today the same imperative drives science, only now it is the entire universe we are trying to measure and enslave. Once again, this isn't obscure anarchist theory. Rene Descartes, considered by many to be the father of modern science, declared that the aim of science is "to make us as masters and possessors of nature." He also declared the universe a giant clockwork, neatly tying these two forms of domination - numbers and time - together.

But isn't growth of new technology driven by simple curiosity?

You hear people say that all the time: "You can't put the genie back in the bottle"; "you're asking people to forget." But that's just another attempt to rationalize craziness by calling it human nature. And it's a variant of the old racist intelligence theory: because the Hopi didn't invent backhoes, they must not be curious. Sure, people are naturally curious but about what? Would you or I aspire to create the neutron bomb? Of course not. But the fact that I don't want to create a neutron bomb doesn't mean I'm not curious. Curiosity is not value-free. Certain types of curiosity arise from certain mindsets, and our culture's curiosity follows the logic of alienation, not simple wonder or the desire to learn.

What does alienation mean to you?

Karl Marx defined alienation as being separated from the means of production; instead of us producing things for our own use, the products of our labor are used against us by the system. I would take it a step further and say that alienation means being estranged from our own experiences, dislodged from our natural mode of being. The more technologized and artificial the world becomes, the more the natural world is evacuated, and the more alienated we become.

I think pre-domesticated people were in touch with themselves in ways we can't even comprehend on the level of the senses, for example. Laurens Van der Post gives accounts of the San, a tribal people in southern Africa, hearing a single engine plane seventy miles away, and seeing four of the moons of Jupiter with the unaided eye. He also says that the San seemed to know what it actually felt like to be an elephant, a lion, or an antelope. What's more, this understanding was apparently reciprocated by the animal. There are scores of accounts by early European explorers describing the lack of fear wild animals showed toward humans.

Just last year I came across something written by eighteenth-century explorer Samuel Hearne, the first white man to explore northern Canada. He described Indian children playing with wolf pups. The children would paint the pups' faces with vermilion or red ocher, and, when they were done playing with them, return them unhurt to the den. Neither the pups nor the adult wolves seemed to mind at all.

Now we gun them down from airplanes. That's progress for you.

More broadly, what has progress meant?

Progress has meant ecological collapse and the near complete dehumanization of the individual. I think there are fewer people now than ever who believe in progress, but many still perceive it to be inevitable. We're certainly conditioned to accept its inevitability; we're held hostage to it, even. The idea of progress now is to make everybody increasingly dependent on technology. We need high-tech medicine to keep us well, for example, but we're supposed to forget that technology created our health problems in the first place. Not just cancers caused by chemicals, but nearly all diseases are a result of either civilization, alienation, or gross habitat destruction.

I have Crohn's disease, a chronic digestive ailment that is virtually unheard-of in non-industrialized nations, becoming common only as those nations industrialize. Industrial civilization is literally eating away at my guts.

I think many people are beginning to understand how hollow the progress myth is. In fact, those in charge of the system don't even use the word progress much anymore. They talk about inertia, meaning, "This is it. Deal with it or get screwed." These days you don't hear about the American Dream or the "glorious new tomorrow." Now it's a global race to the bottom, as transnational corporations compete to see which can exploit workers and degrade the environment the most. Competition at the individual level works the same way. If you don't understand computers, you won't get a job. That's where progress has brought us.

In spite of all this, I'm optimistic, because never before has our whole lifestyle been revealed, at least to those willing to see it, for the sham that it is.

Even if we do see through the lies, what is there for us to do?

The first thing is to question the status quo, to make certain that public discourse deals with these life-and-death issues, rather than avoiding and denying them. This denial can't hold up much longer, because there's such a jarring contrast between reality and what we're being told, especially in this country.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe we can go on living with that contrast forever. The Unabomber posited in his manifesto that people could wind up so conditioned they won't even notice there's no natural world anymore, no freedom, no fulfillment. They'll just take their Prozac every day, limp along, dyspeptic and neurotic, and figure that's all there is.

The Unabomber is a perfect example of why we need to redefine acceptable discourse in this society. His point of view was so suppressed that he thought he had to kill people to bring it up. That says something about the level of denial and repression in our public discussion. This denial is not going to be changed by little reforms, any more than the planet is going to be saved by recycling. To think it will is not just silly, it's criminal. We have to face what's going on. Once we've faced reality, then together we can figure out how to change it.

Personally, I'm betting that demonstrable impoverishment on every level will goad people into questioning the system and mustering the will to confront it. Perhaps, right now, we're in the dark before the dawn. I remember when Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* was published, around 1964. In it, he was saying that people were so manipulated by modern consumerist society that there could be no hope for change. And then, within a couple of years, people woke up.

The sixties helped shape my own optimism. I was in the right place at the right time: in college at Stanford, then living in Haight-Ashbury, with Berkeley just across the bay. I agree with people who say the sixties didn't even scratch the surface of what needed to be done, but you could get a sense of possibility then, a sense that if things kept going the way they were, there was a chance of society finding a different path.

Things didn't keep going that way, of course, but thirty years later I still carry that sense of possibility, and it warms me, even though the situation is frozen and awful. Sometimes I'm amazed that young people today can have any hope, because I'm not sure they've seen any movement succeed even partially.

Some say that the sixties were the last big burst of social change, and from then on it's been downhill.

I sometimes think of it that way, as if it was the big bang, and everything's been cooling ever since. The punk explosion in 1976 was very exciting, but there was no sense that it would kick-start a new round of change. I think we're coming up on something much bigger than the sixties, however -- not only because we have to in order to survive, but because we have fewer illusions now. Back then we had a tremendously high level of idealism, much of it misplaced. We believed it wouldn't take a lot of effort to make a change. We had an unwarranted faith in institutions and didn't think things through. We weren't grounded in reality. If that revolutionary energy comes back now, it's going to be far more effective.

In Elements of Refusal you describe how, in the early part of this century, there was a tremendous amount of revolutionary energy in the air. In many ways, you say, World War I was a state-sponsored attempt to destroy that energy through violence.

War, of course, always requires a good excuse - especially when the state's real enemies are its own citizenry. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand suited the needs of a dying Austro-Hungarian regime, but it by no means caused the war.

The real reason for the war, I believe, was the tremendous unrest in all of Europe. In 1913 and 1914 there had been immense strikes throughout Russia. Austria-Hungary was on the verge of civil war. Revolutionary movements and radical unions were on the rise in the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and England. Even King George V of England acknowledged this when he said, in the summer of 1914, just before the war, "The cry of civil war is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people." Things had to explode, but how, and at whom would the explosion be directed? What better way to control the release of this energy than a long and pointless war?

And it worked. Most unions and left-wing parties backed the war, and those that didn't like the Wobblies here in the U.S. the state simply destroyed. After the war, few people had the heart to pursue revolution, and those who did, like Mussolini and the Bolsheviks, were not true revolutionaries but opportunists who turned the postwar power vacuums to their own advantage.

Where do you think all this alienation today is going to go? Will it explode?

I don't know. I definitely know we aren't the happy, mindless consumers we're supposed to be. We may think we are, but our bodies know better. I recently reviewed Elaine Showalter's book *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*. In it, she talks about the "hysterias" of the nineties: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Gulf War Syndrome, recovered memory, satanic cults, and so on. Some people are offended by her book, because it sounds as if she's saying these problems are all in people's heads. It seems to me, however, that she's proposing something more profound: she's saying that these crises arise with or without physical causes. You might argue, for example, that in the case of Gulf War Syndrome her point of view lets the government off the hook. But, in fact, her theory is more radical than the theory that the government poisoned Americans -- which it's done so many times as to be almost cliché. To say that modern life is so crippling, alienated, and bizarre that it spawns psychogenic disorders indicts not just the government but the whole system.

But what does it mean that our own government would poison us? It's a problem we've not yet addressed: that even if we do learn -- or relearn -- how to live sustainably, we may have to deal with forces out to destroy our new way of life. We all know what would happen if we developed sustainable communities and the dominant culture wanted our resources: our communities would be destroyed, and our resources would be stolen.

That's the reality. We'd like to think that violence isn't a necessary response, but I'm not sure. Of course, if the upheavals are large enough, there doesn't have to be much violence. In May 1968, ten million French workers -- astronomers, factory workers, you name it -- went on a wildcat strike and began to occupy their workplaces. Student demonstrations provided the trigger, but once it started, all these grievances came out in a rush. The police and the army were completely helpless, because nearly the whole country was involved. For a time the government considered sending in NATO forces.

Unfortunately, the uprising was brought under control, mainly by the leftists and unions who wanted to co-opt the revolutionary energy for their own less radical agendas. But for a time the people really had control of the entire country. And it was totally nonviolent.

But the uprising achieved no long-term change.

No, but it did expose how really fragile the state's powers of coercion are. Against that kind of mass uprising, the state is helpless. We saw it happen again with the collapse of state capitalism in the Soviet Union and The Eastern bloc. There wasn't a lot of violence. It all just fell apart. I'm not saying the collapse led to any sort of radical shift, just pointing out that there have been bloodless upheavals in history - even in our own time.

How does one respond sanely and effectively when there is violence? How do you make peace with the fact that, in order to end coercion, you may have to coerce the coercers?

That is a tough one. When Christopher Columbus arrived on these shores, the peaceful indigenous people greeted him with open arms. The smart thing to have done, I suppose, would have been to cut his throat. I don't think many people would argue with that, or if they would, they probably have not experienced violence to their own person, family, or community. But the question arises: among these peaceful people, where would the idea to use violence have come from? It was not their way.

Perhaps we must be what we must overcome. German philosopher Theodore Adorno talks about overcoming alienation with alienation. How does that work? I don't know, but I think about it. I've thought a lot about how I can best serve -- and I realize that I'm privileged with a greater number of options than many -- but for right now I'm comfortable with cultural critique. For me, words are a better weapon than a gun.

Obviously, I've made the same choice. But still, every morning when I awake, I ask myself whether I should write or blow up a dam, because it's not a lack of words that is killing salmon here in the Northwest, but the presence of dams. We kill by inaction as surely as by action.

That reminds me of a quote by Exene Cervenka, the singer in the punk-rock band X. She said, "I've killed way more people than [Unabomber Ted] Kaczynski, because I've been paying a lot of taxes in the last fifteen years, and he hasn't." It was a reminder that we're all implicated.

I spoke on a lot of these topics in a recent talk I gave at the University of Oregon. Near the end I said, "I know that a call for overturning of the system sounds ridiculous, but the only thing I can think of that's even more ridiculous is just to let the system keep on going."

How do we know that the alienation we see all around us will lead to breakdown and rejuvenation?

It's a question of how reversible the damage is. Sometimes in history, when the physical world intrudes to knock us off balance, a situation is reversed in a moment. There's a lovely true story that gives me tremendous hope: The dogs in Pavlov's laboratory were famously conditioned to respond to certain stimuli. They were also fully trained and domesticated. But when there was flood in the basement where they lived, they forgot all of their training in the blink of an eye. We should be able to do at least as well.