

A Conversation with John Zerzan on Direct Action, School Shootings, Authenticity, Veganism & More

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I reached out to Zerzan by email with 4 long questions to help prepare for a different conversation with an anti-industrialist, plus the suggestion that I could post our Q&A text interview around a few places to help clarify his political theory and promote my critique of primitivism. But he offered to voice chat instead, which was a pleasant surprise.

So I'll post the video and transcribe our conversation here. I edited the text slightly for clarity's sake, just to remove filler words and put anything I forgot to say in, but I ran the updated version past Zerzan and he's happy his answers still suit the questions asked.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJuzgHkn0Sc>

How do you determine what direct action targets are justifiable today?

Theo: I'm interested in for example Ted Kaczynski's effect on the world, I know that he partly inspired a lot of people on the left to take actions under the name Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front. But, I'm a worried that he's been a stepping stone to the anti-egalitarian far-right, like that he motivated an affinity group in Mexico called 'Individualists Tending toward the Wild' to go from committing arsons aimed at sabotaging evil companies and instead started to desire to have the wider effect of terrorizing people through fear of injury or death on the simple principle of being against technology and wanting to regress to hunter-gatherer societies.

Zerzan: Yeah, if in fact there really was such a group, that's debatable I guess. They're kind of a farce. But, whether it's fictional or not, the fantasy still raises the same questions.

Theo: I know Ted Kaczynski has posited the conspiracy that the group is mostly a secret service effort to delegitimize radical groups. But I think for Kaczynski it's likely a defence mechanism at not wishing such a group to be real and be associated with him or his political tendency.

But, for sure the actions taken under the name could be more reflective of a few individuals across the world who don't know each other, so not even resembling a group. As well, many of the crimes they claimed to have committed so as to spread fear have been proven not to have happened, which is certainly true.

Zerzan: I'm much more interested in critique than I am in tactics, but to me what's really at the base of it, as it usually is, is the question of violence. What is violence and what is not violence? And I think my position is rather simple, it's not violence if it's not directed at some form of life, in other words you can't violate a building in my view.

I mean friends of mine might disagree, I mean they would say yes it's violence and we don't shrink from violence and that's a position too.

So, I just think that in general there are a lot of targets and you know I don't think you can get too far finding answers to that question in the abstract, but I could be wrong.

Theo: It's a complicated problem, I know some websites try to put together an aims and principles list to explain what actions they'll report on and then I think that can influence what actions people take and what actions people think are justified.¹

You have people using slogans like 'by any means necessary' going all the way back to Malcolm X & Franz Fanon in the 60s, which I guess is an attempt to say we'll go as far as we're pushed, so be careful what state terror tactics you use on us.

I've experimented with writing up a list of principles for what direct action principles are necessary for different stages in history, in terms of peace time and when social tensions are at their height,² of which one principle is; during a non-revolutionary period "never physically hurt people in order to achieve political goals as it runs counter to our philosophy on the left that material conditions create the person and so we should make every peaceful effort to rehabilitate people." So, what do you think about those as an important foundation?

Zerzan: Well I'll just mention that Kaczynski did refine his own view on that, I mean he apologized for that early crude bomb on the jetliner, he renounced that. I think the targets were relatively more appropriate as he went along, as they became more lethal, on that level anyway, I think you could argue that that's the case.³

And where is the effectiveness? I mean what success are you having or not having? I mean that can tell you something about what things to do or what things to avoid."

Theo: And what would be the measurements of success for you do you think?

Zerzan: Well, I would say advancing the dialogue. I think that if your thing is mainly critique, it's a question of the conversation in society, is there some resonance? Is there some interest? Is there some development going on there? In other words, I'm not afraid of certain tactics that people commonly shrink from. and they say well, 'you're just turning everybody off', but sometimes I think you have to go through that stage if you will, I mean sometimes that comes with the territory, in other words, people will be defensive and horrified or whatever at first and then they won't be. You know? Then it becomes part of the dialogue, you know then things change, they

¹ Some examples of anarchist or far-left campaign groups & news platforms adopting an 'aims & principles' charter: www.bamn.com www.a-radio-network.org greenanticapitalist.org

² An Open Letter To John Zerzan by myself

³ This reflects Kaczynski's own grizzly diary notes in that after reading in a newspaper that his first murder victim, computer salesman Scrutton, had been "blown to bits," Kaczynski wrote in his journal; "excellent. Humane way to eliminate somebody. He probably never felt a thing." It was a method of lethal killing which he had developed after killing a romantic interest had proven too much for him. Kaczynski had "given his brother a letter he intended to send to the woman, explaining himself. It was an apology of sorts, but it also contained the disturbing claim that Kaczynski was so enraged that he had waited in the woman's car with a knife, planning to mutilate her. In the end, Ted wrote, he couldn't do it. Attacking someone face to face proved too much for him."

don't remain the same. In other words, there can be shock at the beginning with some tactics, but that wears off, I think, I would assert that's likely to be the case.

Theo: Right, and you've made the comparison between Kaczynski and John Brown in that way. The difference I would say for me though, in those two situations are that John Brown was six years away from the civil war and they were very much accepted at the time to be one of two sides fighting a guerrilla war, one for revolution and the other for conservatism. Kaczynski's actions were in some ways asymmetrical warfare, but they didn't have any snowballing effect, they weren't strategic targets that scared people off from doing what they were doing.

Secondly, Kaczynski's actions were taken during a non-revolutionary period in which I think physically hurting people to achieve political goals is bad. It's bad precisely because the conditions weren't right for revolutionary war.

For example, even if the revolutionary left got really good at assassinating captains of industry and getting away with it, there would be reasonable fears around the psychology of people who would take such an act against people who they could have grown up and been socially conditioned to be themselves, which would inexorably lead to a more authoritarian society and worse foundations on which to work towards a better society.

Zerzan: Well I was quite frankly surprised by the levels of sympathy that were spontaneously expressed in the US in the 90s, I was pleasantly surprised by that. Really, there was much much less horror, or there was horror at the bombings and stuff, but there was also a good deal of sympathy.

Like one case, my wife knew this woman at the business school at the university here, and this person commented on the media footage when they were taking him somewhere in Montana before they moved him to California. And he's dressed, it's a well-known deal, he's got a sport coat on and you can tell he's got a vest on underneath and he's kind of looking up at the sky as he's walking along. And her comment was; "why don't they just put a cross on his shoulders?" In other words comparing him to Jesus for Christ's sake, I mean that's a little unexpected, especially from a rather 'straight person', who's not an anarchist or anything of this sort."

Theo: It was definitely a novel case, that's for sure. I'm fascinated by Aileen Wuornos case, who was this hitch-hiking sex worker in the 70s, who ended up killing and robbing some of her clients, and it was this weird juxtaposition for the time because women were getting killed all the time by men and so it flipped the script a little bit that there was actually truck drivers who had assaulted or raped women on the road before, who began to be too afraid to pick up women because they were worried about getting killed.

On hearing news on the radio of a woman sex worker killing men, one woman compared the unbelievable experience to the first time Orson Welles' radio-play 'The War of The Worlds' was received by a bemused audience.⁴

So, I'm fine with people finding a lot of value in his philosophy and he's definitely an intellectual who has found a fairly good critique of modern civilization in 90% of his writings. I just worry that his effect on the world is going to be a stepping stone and to the right for a lot of people, so in terms of discussing his legacy we need to figure out ways to lay down some principles and say that what he did was chaotic and wrong, and we need we need these solid principles for direct action today, to lay the stepping stones for going forward today.'

For example, I know you disagree with random bombings of the ITS tendency, but in terms of people agreeing with your philosophy on what kind of technology is likely bad which is very broad, this idea that any tool that requires a hierarchy of coordination and specialization is something to be avoided, are you not concerned that you could be promoting direct action which falls well outside ethical principles like the ones I laid out in my email to you, such that you run the risk of motivating someone to take direct action which makes your rebellion look insane and so lead people to wish to preserve the status quo or facilitate a move to a more authoritarian society?

I observed some important push back like the Anarchist Federations response to an Informal Anarchist Federation cell kneecapping a nuclear physicist.⁵ Critiquing firstly, taking actions based on the conspiratorial anti-industrial beliefs in the over-exaggerated dangers of nuclear meltdowns in stable nations. And secondly, the terroristic nature of attempting to spread fear rather than building social movements and sometimes sabotaging what stands in our way, but always with the goal of winning strategic victories.

Zerzan: Well again, I'd say what is happening in terms of social movements now? I mean there's very little right now, I could point to the anti-globalization years so-called, you know around 1999 to 2001 which was a pretty considerable thing, it's kind of forgotten but I mean I don't know, perhaps Kaczynski's forgotten.

Theo: I still don't think a strong argument has been given for justifying direct action which attempts to harm or kill people. And so, unfortunately I think for people who take this stance like yourself and Kaczynski, some important disclaimers need to be made whenever discussing your work if – as members of campaign groups, mutual aid networks and affinity groups – we want to recruit and maintain members or advocate others over to our political philosophy.

But, I'm open to you expanding more on this in the future, here for example are a collection of statements made that I take issue with the most, mostly referencing the Unabomber case and including one from this same interview:

⁴ Sexual Violence Against Women and a Woman's Right to Self-Defense; The Case of Aileen Carol Wuornos by Phyllis Chesler

⁵ AFed statement on kneecapping of nuclear executive by Informal Anarchist Federation

“The concept of justice should not be overlooked in considering the Unabomber phenomenon. In fact, except for his targets, when have the many little Eichmanns who are preparing the Brave New World ever been called to account?... Is it unethical to try to stop those whose contributions are bringing an unprecedented assault on life?”

“They ain’t innocent. Which isn’t to say that I’m totally at ease with blowing them into pieces. Part of me is. And part of me isn’t.”

“I think the targets were relatively more appropriate as he went along, as they became more lethal, on that level anyway, I think you could argue that that’s the case.”

“I ended the speech with the suggestion that there might be a parallel between Kaczynski and John Brown. Brown made an anti-slavery attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia in 1859. Like Kaczynski, Brown was considered deranged, but he was tried and hung. Not long afterward he became a kind of American saint of the abolitionist movement. I offered the hope, if not the prediction, that T.K. might at some point also be considered in a more positive light for his resistance to industrial civilization.”

“Bonanno, it should be added, has been prosecuted repeatedly and imprisoned in Italy for his courageous resistance over the years.” Bonanno was imprisoned for armed robbery and promotes the strategy of kneecapping journalists.

Would industrial society not simply re-emerge?

Theo: I’m sceptical of Kaczynskis’ confidence that a new industrial revolution wouldn’t simply re-emerge, especially with people passing down memories and books of all the benefits to modern life.

My concerns are that firstly, the harm to the environment would be much worse than us simply transitioning to renewable energy and rewilding areas as we depopulate, as is the trend in advanced countries. Secondly, I would argue the probability that we will achieve a long-lasting, mostly peaceful, technologically advanced, left-anarchist society is far more valuable to me than returning to an either never ending series of warring feudal societies or feudal societies that repeats the industrial revolution and has another series of world wars for resources.

Primitive life is more appealing to me personally than feudalism in that I could be born into a fairly egalitarian tribe like the Penan or even if I wasn’t I wouldn’t know any different life, or if I had some of the egalitarian ideals I have now, the possibility would be there to strike out on my own and form an egalitarian tribe. But, bar convincing everyone to be hunter gatherers, or the provision of technological incentives to have fair and democratic communication among societies who trade with each other – you just are going to recreate feudal era societies where you’d have to be very lucky to escape from conscription and tyrants, and where the environmental destruction in the long term could be far worse.

Zerzan: What is happening in terms of social movements? Perhaps Kaczynski's forgotten. And to me his rigidly anti-tech focus kind of loses its steam. As you know, I'm anti-civilization and if you're just stuck with only the anti-tech thing you get to this wooden position where you lose a lot of potential it seems because the rest of it just flows.

I noticed in the notes you were saying well you don't want to be stuck in some medieval deal without industry, well that's right, there you get the problem, right? I mean there was a piece – not to go too far along with this, but there was a piece – in the American magazine 'The New Yorker' back in the 90s when the trial was still going on I believe, it was simply called 'E Pluribus Unabomber', it was kind of a funny little one page piece. And it posed that question precisely, precisely that, okay so you're against modern technology? Does that mean you want the middle ages? And he never answered that question.

I don't want the middle ages, hell no. You know, you've got to look back to see what this crisis is all about what has brought us to this stage. Otherwise you're kind of stuck with this one note deal that's really rather limited. He's insisted over and over and over that he has no interest in anything but modern technology, I mean that's almost silly, the crisis shows that it's much bigger and much deeper than that.

It comes to a head with the technological society, and by the way he told me he got his ideas from Ellul, it's an American vernacular version of the technological society, that's his great gift, that's his great plus, he made it very readable, you know the original or the original translation in English is hard to read, it has that abstract classical mode of the way French are taught to write and it's very off-putting I think in the rest of the world, the rest of the west anyway, the rest of say America.⁶

Theo: Yeah, and it's interesting Ellul is a kind of classical Christian anarchist, who likes the anabaptist tradition of creating small communities within a federated society, so he's very critical of this concept of technique, but he still wants to make accommodations for technology if we can view it as a tool.

But, yeah I think for most of the people who identify with Kaczynski's philosophy, calling themselves anti-industrialists rather than primitivists is an optics move, in that they don't want to be seen to be striving for something that most people see as impossible to achieve. Because an anti-industrial revolution is achievable if you can destroy the electricity grids and keep them from being rebuilt, and once it is thoroughly destroyed it will be harder to rebuild and easier to stop than at least other pre-industrial oppressive conditions like feudal tyrants.

Zerzan: Well sure, it's less abstract, here we are so totally immersed in the technology and the alienation it's brought is just frightful, it's so palpable, it's just you know utterly impossible to ignore.

So, yeah there's the technology on all sides at every moment, so sure it's obviously part of the problem of course it's right up there, but that's just part of it. To me it's

⁶ The Technological Society by Jaques Ellul

like the leftists who are only limited to talking about capitalism, well of course one's against capitalism, but it goes much deeper than that, right? Look at the rest of it, look at how it emerges and why?

Theo: Yeah and I definitely like a lot of Bookchin & eco-feminist philosophy who write about the priestly classes throughout history, who even before there was capitalism were trying to keep people ignorant and regimented into hierarchies.

But, in terms of getting this global shift is it that you just don't have kids and within a hundred years you've only got a very small population and obviously using some direct action to encourage people and show them the way?

Zerzan: Well yeah, it's kind of hard to answer, I mean that's the challenge, what would that look like? How fast could that happen if you change directions and start to imagine things so differently? I mean who can say? Whether it happens at all that is obviously an open question, we may not get anywhere with this, I'm not clear about that and no one can be I don't think.

So, but you start to think about the emerging directions and the transition and so forth, but only when you get to that place can you start to pose those questions and think about specific practical parts of the picture, it's difficult to speculate there and I have to some degree, but that's a further question it seems to me.

Theo: Yeah it's interesting, I like the critique in a lot of ways, like I talk about this concept of minimum viable use. Like we have a really nice culture in Europe of punk post, where if you want to talk to someone who's on a camp across the country and someone's going that way, then you write them a letter and that person takes it to them. So, rather than calling them you put the effort into the creativity of the writing to them and then that's the minimum viable use technology needed for that task and then in doing that you've fulfilled yourself more than just a quick phone call.⁷

Zerzan: Yeah exactly, something technology is erasing. Now we just text, don't even want to hear the human voice. I mean it's just getting so monstrous, so fast, and maybe that's of course the strangely silver lining in the whole thing, it's just impossible to ignore the effects. And people are so miserable, I mean the immiseration is just almost unimaginable, but there it is, it's the alienation, the isolation, there's suicide among the young, deaths of despair, opioid crisis, on and on, and on, it's just huge estrangement.

Theo: Yeah so that's a good Segway to the next topic...

⁷ Minimum Viable Technology by David Charles

Do you worry that you validated and perhaps encouraged the irrationally violent desires of the school shooter who called your radio show through your shared desire for de-industrialisation?

Theo: You talk a lot about school shootings on your show and it's such a horrific thing and it's a sign of atomization, and culture being fragmented.

You had a weird case of someone phoning your radio show who years later committed a school shooting. And there was a CNN piece...⁸

Zerzan: Adam Lanza, yeah that was pretty incredible. He acted out the very thing that he was trying to raise awareness about, the chimpanzee attacked its owner in a very horrible way and you know he said that's us, we're forced into these impossible unnatural ways of being and people are gonna snap, like the chimpanzee and then he snapped. I mean talk about incredible irony there.

Theo: Yeah, I mean it's a really difficult one, have you thought about how you maybe would have handled it if you had the amazing foresight of interpreting what he meant or what his state of mind was.

Zerzan: Well that would have been really nice, but he struck my co-host as kind of a quiet troubled high school kid, but picking up on on the reality of life in late civilization and how bizarre it is and the pressures one's under.

We both said yeah exactly, thanks for the call, I mean it certainly did not occur to us that he was part of the very thing he was warning about and I guess that was about a year later that that happened. That would have been awfully nice, but we didn't, we thought that that's quite a good insight, that's quite a good parallel that you're making and you know that was it, there wasn't any dialogue, we didn't even... he was just trying to bring out that point and bothered to call and yeah, 'thanks for the call' and that was that.

If only we could have or seen that he was actually going in that very direction, it would have been nice, we could have tried to do something, tried to engage him in terms of where he was at, with how his life was, in his own life.

Theo: Yeah and I mean I know primitivists in my own life and I know a lot of them get a lot of value from it, when they get into the philosophy and they start an allotment and they feel more connected to the earth and all the stuff and maybe work on a food no bombs stall and stuff, they're often very much part of campaigns on the left.

But, saying all that, I'm not a primitive so I know that if I'd had that call I might have tried to challenge him a little bit on domestication and how inevitable violence is, even if you feel pushed to an extent through bullying in school or something, like whether I don't know... I guess my fumbling over my words now shows that it's hard

⁸ Newtown shooter may have called 'AnarchyRadio' show before attack

and I wouldn't necessarily have the perfect words to say, but I don't know, I wonder if there wasn't someone he could find with a shared philosophy of de-industrialisation and he'd phoned up someone who had challenged him a bit, that it could have been a turning point.

Like with the CNN piece, the doctor of criminology they had on at the end said:

“the subtext of what he's [the school shooter is] saying is violence is innate and instinctual to humans, and really should not be punished because it's their natural basis, that's the message I think he's trying to get across, and the parallel to himself is obvious, he feels possessed by this need, this compulsion to commit violence.”

So do you agree with that? Do you think that he was saying something like that or...?

Zerzan: It sounds very, very off base, that people are innately homicidal, is that what he's saying?

Theo: Well, I think the criminologist was saying that Lanza was bringing up the story because maybe he felt those impulses within himself because of domestication, because of like bullying at school, and so if there wasn't domestication, it wouldn't have happened to him, so then his violence is justified in some way.

Zerzan: Well yeah, that seemed to be the lesson of what he phoned the show about, you know that's what you get, that's why this chimpanzee freaked out and attacked its owner, I mean precisely because of the domestication control, the so unnatural and painful, and it just caused the animal to snap. And you know he was saying of course that corresponds to the situation in society, it's so unbearable really and I bet there was quite possibly bullying in the picture. There have been other cases of mass shootings where there was in fact bullying and then that's part of the you know the onerous life that somebody's living and they... it's intolerable so yeah...

Theo: I mean still I would have liked to try to challenge him or challenge anyone who talked about violence as somewhat inevitable, I would have tried to say it's not acceptable the way schools are structured at the moment, the way bullying is allowed to happen, and the way we are domesticated by technology to a degree, but I just worry that because there's a sect of like nihilist primitivism of the ITS variety, that think nature is violent in some way, rather than nature just being destructive, that think they are justified to do it, so if I came across someone like that, I would hope that I would try and talk them over to a kind of personal low tech lifestyle, but to see that like there's a future in building better schools and not being justified to take violence in that way.

Zerzan: You have to see... I mean is somebody coming from an anti-authoritarian point of view or not? You know that's kind of basic. Or to put it another way, is this person an anarchist? Are we starting out with the same sort of general approaches or values?

I don't know, some of this stuff is just off the table, like this ITS stuff, that just strikes me as completely unworthy of making any contribution at all. I was just appalled that people like the Little Black Cart folks were saying 'oh we can learn something from this', really? Murdering random people? No, it's not, that's just sick and fucked up and if that's what passes for being an anarchist, no thanks. You just have to distance yourself from shit like that.

Theo: Cool, okay yeah, definitely agree on that.

Finally is primitivism motivated primarily by a desire to return to a more innocent time in one's childhood?

Theo: So the last thing was, I read what I thought was a good book by Saul Newman on 'The Politics of Post-Anarchism', his take on where we should be going, he kind of values do you know 'le ZAD' in France, which means 'Zone of Defence', so mostly separating oneself off from cities, but still rebelling, just not in a storming the Bastille way. In the book anyway Newman critiques you I think by saying how the desire for a primitive way of life is often a desire for a more innocent time in one's childhood:

"Where Zerzan's argument becomes problematic is in the essentialist notion that there is a rationally intelligible presence, a social objectivity that is beyond language and discourse. To speak in Lacanian terms, the prelinguistic state of *jouissance* is precisely unattainable: it is always mediated by language that at the same time alienates and distorts it. It is an imaginary *jouissance*, an illusion created by the symbolic order itself, as the secret behind its veil. We live in a symbolic and linguistic universe, and to speculate about an original condition of authenticity and immediacy, or to imagine that an authentic presence is attainable behind the veils of the symbolic order or beyond the grasp of language, is futile. There is no getting outside language and the symbolic; nor can there be any return to the pre Oedipal real. To speak in terms of alienation, as Zerzan does, is to imagine a pure presence or fullness beyond alienation, which is an impossibility. While Zerzan's attack on technology and domestication is no doubt important and valid, it is based on a highly problematic essentialism implicit in his notion of alienation.

To question this discourse of alienation is not a conservative gesture. It does not rob us of normative reasons for resisting domination, as Zerzan claims. It is to suggest that projects of resistance and emancipation do not need to be grounded in an immediate presence or positive fullness that exists

beyond power and discourse. Rather, radical politics can be seen as being based on a moment of negativity: an emptiness or lack that is productive of new modes of political subjectivity and action. Instead of hearkening back to a primordial authenticity that has been alienated and yet which can be recaptured – a state of harmony which would be the very eclipse of politics – I believe it is more fruitful to think in terms of a constitutive rift that is at the base of any identity, a rift that produces radical openings for political articulation and action.”

Zerzan: Well I know Newman, I mean he’s a classic post-structuralist, post-modern character. It gets down to basic stuff doesn’t it? I mean if you feel like presence is just an illusion, most basically because there’s nothing outside of symbolic culture, right? “Outside the text, there is nothing” Derrida, right? Well what if that’s not true? What if there’s an alternative to symbolic culture? To the whole representational racket?

I mean I think there is quite possibly, there is that possibility. In fact in practice there was... hunter-gatherer life, pre-symbolic culture, right? For over a million years, you know face-to-face community, non-hierarchical, these are generalities here, but they did quite well without symbolic culture, without art, without the concept of numbers, without a lot of things.

So you can make the assertion and you know a lot of it’s traced back to say Derrida or others, but just because you’re saying there is no presence, that’s just a fiction, that the presence cannot exist because you can’t get outside of the symbolic, well that’s one point of view, but I don’t think that’s true.

That’s just, you know it’s part of the general surrender politically, in more or less reactionary times you get philosophies like that, which sort of take over. The whole backward aspect of post-modernism, it really is a way of... at a time when there’s pretty much no social movements you get stuff like that and that’s a crude way to put it, but that’s part of the picture I think.

Theo: Okay, yeah I take your point, I think obviously they would say that about some primitivists. But...

I guess I don’t know how they’re defining symbolism, my perspective is animals are using symbols and language going way back to parrots and primates, but...

Zerzan: Well I think that’s more... I mean that is tricky, it is an open question, animals do communicate, but I think it’s more signals than symbols. It’s not really representational, in the way of symbolic culture that the humans have just because they communicate, of course they do, birds, all sorts of animals, they have to for survival, but that doesn’t make it very symbolic, it seems to me, but anyway that’s... These definitions have to you know... they’re sort of problematic because we’ve used these terms in different ways or inelastic ways that then the whole conversation becomes a little confusing, so I don’t want to take too rigid a position, but you don’t have to have symbolic language for there to be communication. Anyway that’s obvious I guess.

Theo: Well, yeah it's tricky for sure, I mean I get into debates all the time with people who want to use language like abolish work and abolish prisons and I guess it's an attempt to reframe the debate.

But, just in terms of this term presence, whether we should desire an authenticity of a long period of our evolutionary history as humans. I don't know, like I think potentially we could be suffering more now for sure, but it could be suffering that we desire to take on if we can get to this left-anarchist, pro technology future. It could be a source of virtue for us, striving for these intellectual skills.

And then authenticity, as a concept it's only developed recently, like we used to think of authenticity differently as like sincerity. So, the effort you put into helping your family would be an indication of whether you were being authentic to yourself, if you were being just and fair to your family in taking on your responsibilities.

So, I don't know whether it would be authentic for me to desire hunter-gather life, I know I would desire hunter-gatherer life more than the middle ages, but I think rather than just settling for primitive life or just settling for the middle ages, I think we should try and be aspirational to this future world of still being able to use some technology, like printing presses and penicillin and stuff, so I don't know.

Zerzan: Yeah, it's needed these different steps, and one requires the other, I mean now technology comes around to promise to heal what it has caused in the first place, so where do you try to arrest that progression?

And what does it all depend on? You don't have any technology really without the extraction, without the mining, the smelters, the warehouses. And who do people on the left assume is going to do all that? It doesn't exist without all that? So that's a form of slavery, but they seem to be fine with that, to have the wonders of technology resting upon what? I mean not only the ruin of the natural world, of the biosphere, but you know wage slavery for almost countless people, for that to exist. That's not a very liberatory assumption.

Theo: Yeah, and if I believed that we were just going the way of machines and we were going to create artificial intelligence and terminate ourselves by just letting them take over or becoming more machine like ourselves I would definitely worry...

Zerzan: And deciding everything and people don't understand how they work, I mean we've swept along in this whole van of the progress with a capital 'p' and look where it's gotten us, it's just becoming horrible on every front, it's one large crisis where all the parts of it are kind of merging into a very, very bad picture.

Theo: Yeah I don't know, like I'm still researching, maybe I'm being naive in just advocating for something where that is more likely to happen, but yeah I worry that if people take direct action and try to just separate themselves off from technology and cities, that we leave people to suffer, like we lose hospitals... I mean I don't know how useful you think hypotheticals are, but so definitely if technology is this thing that just manufactures consent and we get towards robots then that's definitely bad and if we have a reasonable high confidence that is the future then obviously I would

be on board with just trying to collapse the system in order to try and get back to primitivism, but hypothetically...

Zerzan: These are big challenges, you know everybody wants community, right? I mean we can all agree on that, except what happened to it? Why did it go away? Why has mass society all but obliterated that? All but obliterated the face-to-face human contact kind of world? Which I think really did roughly exist before domestication.

You know, this sounded so utopian to me when I first discovered the literature that I first ran into by accident, the whole anthropological deal, but it actually isn't and it's just well known a lot of it.

I mean a lot of it isn't well known, I grant you we can't know precisely, or even vaguely, what the consciousness was, how satisfied people were in their lives. We really don't know that, but I mean there was some pretty good non-lethal developments apparently, you know some contacts that were worthy of lasting for quite some time.

You know domestication, I mean that's like one tenth of one percent of our of human species, anyway you know all that.

Theo: Yeah I really value some nomadic cultures that I'm worried that we're encroaching on. I think there was a story recently about loggers in the amazon taking away the tribe's bow and arrows so that they wouldn't shoot at them, but then leaving them to starve in this horrible way.

What was it gonna say, oh yeah so I don't know how useful useful you think hypotheticals are but in terms of like, say we realized this hunter gatherer world, but there were still some people who had the knowledge to create assembly lines for things like penicillin and glasses and stuff, and they saw people who were disabled or injured, and they wanted to create some technology to help these people. Would that be a legitimate target for sabotage or would that just be a consent issue, where you let them do that even if you worry that it helps restart technological society?

Zerzan: Well, I don't know, I think we'd have to, if everybody could pitch in and try to find workable solutions as we go, I mean I think there could be intermediate steps, you know we don't want people unable to live without certain technologies to just simply die off, but at the same time it's not clear to me that we need the worldwide grid otherwise you can't achieve that. I mean I think there are other methods, some of which are just simple things like when you're peddling a bicycle with the light, you pedal and it generates electricity to light your tail-light or your headlight. So why can't you do that with somebody who needs a respirator? You know, you don't have to have a whole world system going may be to fix, you know to help people in different situations and as we kind of try to go away from the dependency which has been really pretty fatal.

You know something like that, whereas it isn't just a blanket theoretical rejection overnight or you push a button and it's something else, I mean that isn't quite a fair characterization of the primitivist thinking I'm familiar with.

Theo: No sure, it's just a funny hypothetical for like thousands of years in the future, like my ideal future is a pro-tech society that conscientiously decides not to

use technology badly and I know you don't see that as possible, but I don't know I see some value in labor movement philosophy of if animals finds a use value in the land that we can just give them large areas to re-wild. And I would want people to have the option of being able to live in bear country and risk getting attacked by bears if they want to.

Zerzan: Sure, but that doesn't seem likely, that goes against the logic of domestication, the only thing that was left for indigenous people is the most inhospitable places on the planet and you know same goes for other species, that's why extinction is just running rampant and one species after another is either gone or threatened with extinction. That's the logic of it, yeah we can dream up free spaces for somebody or another, but where would that come from? Where would you find the basis for that inside this system, which is so all enveloping, I would be in favor of it, don't get me wrong, but it's just hard to see if there's a solution within the system.

Should we hunt animals in a peaceful world?

Theo: Okay yeah, so I've gone through all my questions, but I can give you one more hypothetical if you like. There was a podcast you did for Oak Journal on lots of topics like humanism and one thing that came up was veganism and then there was an interesting response by Ria who runs the website VeganPrimitivist.wordpress.com. They did a long response to some of the points that were brought up.⁹

And anyway their ideal future is people foraging plants and mushrooms only, and I think using fire, but just conscientiously choosing not to hunt animals. And I don't personally think that you could plan that diet very well, with like B12, without fortified foods and stuff, I think duckweed we've found out now has a lot of B12, so if you lived somewhere there was duckweed, you could maybe do that, but another hypothetical that might reflect the modern world is...

If you knew that you could meet all your nutritional needs living this life, and you knew there wasn't going to be warfare, and you knew you could maintain the skills of hunting if you needed to go back to that, would you hypothetically choose not to hunt animals? Just living a life where you're communicating with them through seeing otters in the wild, but just choosing not to hunt, do you think that would be an ethical responsibility? What do you think if you knew that you could survive perfectly fine with low labor hours?

Zerzan: That sounds rather nice, yeah I wouldn't argue against it, I mean if it's conceivable and I think you know hunter-gatherer life was more gathering than hunting, but still, maybe that would be more ideal. If you're trying to learn anything from the record, it's a bit hard to imagine that in terms of our evolution, but it sounds nice, yeah.

⁹ Response to Bellamy, JZ & Steve Kirk condemning vegan primitivism

Theo: Yeah it's a nice dream. I just often come up against people who are really invested in like eating meat because it's their culture and eating these horrible factory farmed animals, so I think it's interesting, like I use the argument of we have all these glass greenhouses now, we have thousands of vegetables we can grow all year round to eat a varied diet, but even if we went back to primitivist life and we could still meet all our nutritional needs, I think there would be some ethical responsibility there too, just to embody this more compassionate lifestyle.

Zerzan: Right, I salute your values, I think that's very worthwhile to think about.

Theo: Okay cool, that's good, I think people will be interested in that.

The Ted K Archive

Theo Slade

A Conversation with John Zerzan on Direct Action, School Shootings, Authenticity,
Veganism & More

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