

John Zerzan and the primitive confusion

Alain C.

2000

Contents

I. Manipulated prehistory	3
II. At the Source of Alienation: an ideological mix	12
III. Communism cannot be “primitive”	14

French communist group En Attendant's critique of two key text by anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan.

The publishers L'Insomniaque recently put out two collections of articles by J. Zerzan: "Futur Primitif", in December 1998 ("Future Primitive" first published by Autonomedia, New York, and "Aux Sources de l'Alienation", in October 1999 ("Elements of Refusal", Left Bank Books, Seattle, 1998). We say that these two texts are an ideological re-writing of the history of humanity, that J. Zerzan makes use of different research works by prehistorians, anthropologists and philosophers with the sole aim of establishing a pre-conceived idea of what humanity is all about, what it has been and what it will become. The ideology of J. Zerzan is without doubt generous, and besides throws up some interesting problems, but it is only an ideology.

The theses of J. Zerzan however, among the small circle where they have been distributed, do not seem to have stirred any debate, and have only met with an approval or vague reprobation, as far as we know. The aim of this pamphlet is equally to launch this debate, but on a more concrete basis.

I. Manipulated prehistory

All that we know of the dawn of humanity, we know by the study of the material traces that the first men have left, and which have reached us. These traces from early times, are essentially, animal and human bones, and carved stones. Their arrangement in the particular sites provide equally precious information. The essential fact is that these traces are extremely fragmentary, impossible to date with any great precision. Starting from these traces, prehistorians establish hypotheses, and then set up theories, often challenged by later discoveries. Prehistory is a field of very shifting knowledge, always subjected to changes: the idea we tend to have of this period, or rather these periods, cannot be as precise as the ones we tend to have about more recent periods. Certainties are rare, and more general than precise. The last thirty years, with numerous discoveries and the evolution of methods, have considerably tuned the stereotypical image of prehistory, which has prevailed up to the middle of the XX century. At the same time, other problems have appeared, tending to render these questions even more complicated.

Even the definition of man poses a problem. It is generally reckoned for all the Paleolithic period, which spreads over 2.5 to 3 million years that there are four representatives of the Homo type: firstly the most ancient, *Homo habilis*, from which three more recent species descend, chronologically: *Homo erectus* (Pithecanthropus), archaic *Homo sapiens* (Neanderthal), and lastly "modern" man, the only one who is present today on this planet, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Before the most ancient Homo type, we had a different species of Australopithecus that *Homo habilis* was for a long time close to, himself being a descendent of a type of Australopithecus called slender. These anthropoid primates used tools made of stone and bone and no doubt practiced organised

hunting, but are not part (for the time being at least) of the Homo club. It must be equally noted that whilst belonging to the Homo type, *Homo habilis* is generally not considered to be part of the same species as *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Starting from these basic facts, one can already be aware of the manipulations operated by Zerzan. In view of the numerous quotes which he has recourse to in his articles, one cannot suspect him of being ignorant of the subject of which he speaks. The omissions, or rather the choice he makes of certain theories, to the detriment of other theses, show a deliberate willingness on his part. Zerzan wants to paint an idyllic picture of the origins of humanity: he is going therefore to seek the elements that will permit him to paint this picture.

It is first important for our ideologue to date humanity as far as possible, and this for one precise reason: the more man evolves towards his “modern” form, the more the elements showing the existence of what Zerzan calls “alienation” (religious and artistic practices, articulated language, sense of time and project, etc.) become unquestionable. He must then turn towards the most archaic moments of human history. The Neanderthal even (300 to 400 000 years) seems a bit too “cultured”. He will thus seek his examples preferably among the very first humans, the famous *Homo habilis*. But even this solution poses quite a few problems. Zerzan will manage to pull through at the price of intellectual contortions verging on honesty.

Besides he himself foretells what his method will be at the beginning of “Future Primitive” after having voiced some worthy reservations about separate science, he agrees to acknowledge what he calls with contempt “specialised literature”, that is to say scientific, “can nevertheless be of an highly appreciable assistance”. And who else “could” give us this “assistance”, unless we ourselves become archaeologists, that is to say holders of the dreadful separate knowledge? Does he imagine that the first men are going to resuscitate in order to tell us how they lived? Archaeology is the sole available source for anyone who wants to know what early humanity was like. And thus, whatever one may say besides, we are compelled to reason from these discoveries onward. It is not an “assistance”, it is all that we have.

But for Zerzan scientific discoveries are just a way to develop his ideology. That is why he intends to tackle science “with the appropriate method and vigilance”, and that he declares himself “decided to go beyond the limits”. Clearly he will take no account of what hinders him; he will reserve the right of using the argument of scientific authority (with, one must note, more certainty than the scientists themselves) when it will be convenient for him, and to reject it when it will cease to be convenient to him. Here is the essential of Zerzan’s “method”, which can be found in all his texts. It is a matter of ‘instrumentalizing’ science, which, because it is nothing but a cultural institution, can never be objective, and must therefore be taken as such. This is an old conception of scientific activity put at the service of an ideology, which the brave doctors Lysenko and Mengele brilliantly illustrated during the past century.

This serious “method”, let us have a look at its development.

We can start with the problem of hunting: Zerzan is non-violent, most certainly a vegetarian, and thus he considers that eating meat is immoral, since it implies killing animals, and is bad for one's health.

Moreover, it is tiring and it forces one to be organised. Gathering must have been the natural state of good" humanity, which is to say the one that most resembles Zerzan. It remains to be proved. He does not prove it, he asserts it. According to him, "from now on it is commonly acknowledged" that gathering constituted "the principal food source". Who acknowledges this, from what, he does not say. And the "principal" source does not mean the "whole" source. But this is not serious: this affirmation drowned in considerations about the non-sexual division of labour (Zerzan is also feminist of course.) allows, by a simple language effect, of giving the impression that the first humans were vegetarians.

But he goes further: he asserts, with a certain Binford, "that no tangible traces of butchering practices indicate a consumption of animal products until the appearance, relatively recent, of anatomically modern humans." Here they are these goddam Neanderthal, bearers of all the ills. There is nevertheless a problem. As we indicated at first, the knowledge of prehistory rests on discoveries of archaeological sites. I do not know on what Binford relies in order to assert the absence of meat consumption, or more exactly "butchering practices" before such a "recent" date, but there is at least one site, amongst the most well-known and the most ancient (1.8 million years) which would demonstrate the contrary: the site of Olduvai in Northern Tanzania, where remains of the first *Homo habilis* were discovered between 1953 and 1975, our most distant ancestors, therefore. The remains of an elephant have equally been found mixed with more than 200 tools used for carving-up. One could say that this does not indicate hunting, but maybe a carrion practice, the fact remains nonetheless that carving-up is indeed a "butchering practice". On the same site, three skulls of the same species of antelope bearing the same fracture were also found, resulting from a blow struck with the aid of a pebble or a club. This indicates no doubt an already codified practice of slaughtering, following precise rules, and denies in any case the thesis of only an occasional consumption of meat, and even more of a generalised vegetarianism until the appearance of "modern" man.

All the same, on the site of the Vallonnet, discovered in 1962, and going back 950 000 years, the remains of a whale, most likely stranded on a nearby beach, were found, which was dragged to this cave where it was carved up. The first stone tools therefore have not solely and all been used, as is quite evident, to "work with plant matter". The quotation that the author makes on p.38 in "Future Primitive" of tools earmarked for this use, is thus valid, if it is exact, only in the particular case he quotes, particular case which he attempts, by a classic oratory method, to make out to be a generality.

Our objective in this pamphlet is not to bring debates to a close on prehistory: we have neither the means nor the desire. We simply observe that Zerzan, who is quite aware of the Olduvai site, since he mentions it on p.22 of "Future Primitive" in order to praise the beauty of the Acheulian handaxe, and certainly knows the one from the

Vallonnet, purely and simply forgets them when it is a matter of speaking of the theses which do not satisfy him.

When one puts forward a thesis, in archaeology, as elsewhere, it seems evident that one must at least quote, or at least dismantle, the thesis that would contradict the one we put forward. Zerzan ignores the contradiction, or more exactly, he says nothing about it. Not wanting to bring up the contradiction is a current practice of the organised social lie that Zerzan would like to denounce. Using his methods, even with another aim, Zerzan is part of this lie.

One can equally evoke the question of Zerzan's feminism, and of its projection in the study of prehistory. In order to back up the thesis of the non-sexual division of labour, Zerzan advances firstly the predominance of gathering as, as being "naturally" an activity non-sexually divided. Despite what we have said earlier, the predominance of gathering is more or less certain. We have only made clear that it certainly was not the sole nourishing activity of the first men. But what can we know of the sexual division or not of this task at that time? We can extrapolate from today's existing hunter-gatherers. But today's hunter-gatherers are not more "primitive" than we are ourselves. Clearly, they are as much *sapiens sapiens* as us. All that we can say of the culture of the first men from about two million years ago is that it will be nothing but extrapolations and suppositions. It is as absurd to suppose that the social conditions of these first groups have not evolved in two million years than to speak of "prehistoric man", as one sole and same species, a unique entity. Let us not even speak of this framework of trying to evoke "the condition of woman" in prehistoric times.

Zerzan also offers us an argument, appealing this time to Joan Gero, saying that "stone tools could have belonged to men as well as being those of women". Indeed. But this does not signify absolutely that they were. In this case, the most honest thing to do is to say that we know nothing about it. But honesty, as we have seen, is not the principle concern of Zerzan. At the same time, Poirier tells us, there exists "no archaeological proof to back up the theory according to which the first humans have practiced "a sexual division of labour". That, which for Poirier is nothing but an absence of proof, visibly constitutes one for Zerzan. What emerges simply from all these quotes is that only we cannot say that such a division has ever existed. It is equally possible that women participated in primitive hunts, indeed even children. The problem is that in the absence of archaeological proof, we can say nothing.

In the framework of his feminism, Zerzan also produces a theory of the reduction of sexual dimorphism, and in particular the decrease in the size of canine teeth in males. He says "the disappearance of the big canine teeth in the male backs up greatly the thesis according to which the female of the species would have operated a selection in favour of "sociable and sharing males".

But the disappearance of the big canine teeth in no way "backs up" anything of the kind, and even less "probably". The disappearance of the big canine teeth is the result of a process; it is not there to "back up" anything whatsoever. It is hard to see how the young who "have got their fangs out" would be less 'sociable and sharing' than the

others, and above all, “being sociable and sharing” would in itself shorten their teeth. Loads of “sociable and sharing” primates still have fangs to this day. But Zerzan tells us it is so because amongst primates, the female “has not got this choice”. One of the results of the liberation of woman in Palaeolithic times would have been to shorten the teeth of young males. It is quite confusing, but this reveals above all the idea that Zerzan, American feminist, has about the “war of the sexes”, and his projection of this idea in the study of prehistory. In passing, and despite once more that our objective is not to discuss archaeological theses, we will simply point out that another thesis commonly accepted considers that the reduction in the size of the dentition at that time is due to the lengthening of the period of childhood and adolescence. The child being thus placed under the protection of adults longer, which permits him to acquire complex technical skills that Palaeolithic industry requires, later meets his needs in matters of food, which enables his dentition to grow more slowly as generations come and go. This theory is as valid as the one of the direct selection by females. But is less spectacular, less feminist, and above all it tends to show that the social organisation in these distant times had already reached such a degree of complexity that something like a specialised apprenticeship might have already become necessary. The folkloric thesis of selection by females is thus there to mask the “problem” of a complex socialization from the very beginning of humanity.

At this stage of our analysis of the Zerzan text, one can see clearly that even by dating back humanity to its most ancient representatives, he does not manage, and for a very good reason, to demonstrate the existence of the “good” humanity which he is looking for. Not finding it, he suggests it by different means, essentially of rhetoric nature, and by the dissimulation of information that he unquestionably holds.

We do not say that everything he puts forward is false. We say that he seeks to draw up a uniform picture of the life of prehistoric man, based on a priori and on projections of his own ideology. Which is an essential danger when one studies other cultures, and even more in the case of cultures so remote in time, and on which we have so little information, such as the Palaeolithic culture, namely the danger of projecting one’s own culture onto other peoples, Zerzan sets it up as a method. This inherent tendency of all human sciences, from which no human science will ever be able to rid itself off (man takes himself to be subject of study being equally a subject being part of a culture, and reasoning from it), requires the greatest prudence. The surest way of being wrong in the face of whatever reality is to want at all costs to make it say something. We also do not say that it is forbidden to take risks, nor that you must banish all intuition. A number of great discoveries are the fruit of a first intuition. One can nevertheless, starting from concrete facts, formulate some hypotheses, and if these hypotheses are proven, one can even reach theory. But Zerzan does not reach towards theory, since for him the hypotheses are already the answer. And, by doing that, he is not even “mistaken”. It is worse than that. He deliberately manipulates some information. In a word, he lies, that is to say he wants to deceive others.

The cases that we have studied, the one about hunting and the one about the sexual division of tasks, are finally, nothing but details in Zerzan's ideology. In "Future Primitive" a thesis is expressed, which one finds in all his articles and truly seems to be the central thesis (cf. "Elements of Refusal") of his clumsy historical reconstruction. This thesis, he expresses it like this, on p.23 of "Future Primitive": "It strikes me as plausible that intelligence, informed by the success and satisfactions of a gather-hunter. existence, is the very reason for the pronounced absence of 'progress'. Division of labour, domestication, symbolic culture — these were evidently refused until very recently." Once more we can admire the manner in which he uses language, which he denounces elsewhere as an instrument of domination. Once more the hypothesis becomes immediately conclusion. One goes from "it seems plausible" to "evidence". Between the two, there is nothing, just the point that separates a phrase from another, just the void of a thought that talks a lot of hot air. The sole shade of argument which he gives in order to back up this central thesis, the thesis of the conscious refusal of progress by humanity, namely that 1) the Paleolithic humans were as "intelligent" as us, and thus they had the intellectual means of this progress 2) this progress did not take place, during more than two million years. It is thus, "evidently", that humans have refused this progress. As one can suspect, things are a bit more complicated than this. Besides it is not necessary to possess detailed knowledge in the field of prehistory to grasp what is nasty in this "reasoning". It is not so much that the starting point appears to be absurd as that: after all, why not? Only, you ought to be able to prove it. How could we prove this thesis? : simply by archaeological discoveries, and logical reasoning from these discoveries, since we have no other means to prove anything whatsoever about this period.

Thus let us propose a problem. In order to be able to speak of "refusal", it is necessary that the person concerned or group have knowledge of what they refuse. One only refuses that which is "proposed" to us, that which is presented to us. One can, for example, speak of the refusal of the weaving looms by the English textile workers of 1830. One would thus, in order to speak of the refusal of agriculture and rearing of animals by Paleolithic humans, that these practice which presented themselves to them, would be experimented with by them, then rejected.

One would need thus in order to prove this thesis that a site be found proving that humans had started, at a given time in prehistory, to practice the rearing of animals or agriculture, then had brutally abandoned them to resume their life of hunter-gatherer. One could well speak in this case of "refusal". But for the moment such a site has not been discovered. If it had been, Zerzan would have been eager to point it out, and he would have been right. But it is not the case. In fact, as soon as humans have practiced agriculture or the rearing of animals, they have never gone "backwards". We have cases, at the beginning of the Neolithic era, of sedentary humans practising also gathering and hunting, but these groups have afterwards evolved solely towards agriculture, and have not, to our knowledge, destroyed their "permanent" house, abandoned their fields and gone back to their nomadic life. Here is what ought to have been the thought process

of Zerzan: from an original hypothesis, to search for concrete elements, articulated in a logical process, allowing it to be confirmed. For as long as no element is there to prove it, a hypothesis is only what it is: a purely theoretical view, which can be fruitful, or on the contrary proves to be inoperative. For the time being, the hypothesis of Zerzan is inoperative. We do not reproach him for having put it forward; we do not say that it will never be proved. We say that it falls within the province of a lying and ideological practice to put forward a hypothesis as “evidence” whilst there is not a glimmer of proof to back it up.

Zerzan could have also explored another course in order to prove his hypothesis (by the way, it is quite scandalous all the same that we are forced to do this work instead of him). There are regions, even today, where hunter-gatherers mix more or less with settled farmers. One can speak for example of certain Bushmen from Africa, of which some ethnological surveys have revealed that they found agriculture to be “useless or exhausting”. There would be thus a “refusal” with the full knowledge of the facts. However, to our knowledge, these Bushmen themselves have never gone through agriculture, which they would have rejected from “the inside”. One can say thus according to this point of view that they reject herewith, above all, a way of life that is external to their own culture. It is however noteworthy on this subject, that if nomads do not go towards settled people, settled people do not go also towards nomads. What arguments farmers would give to justify their “refusal” of the state of hunter-gatherer? Zerzan would say without doubt that they are already immediately damaged by alienated culture, and that they are incapable of returning to a “good” humanity. That may be so, but we really do not have any means to estimate the degree of alienation of a culture in relation to another one, nor even to know if the concept of alienation is pertinent in this very case. What is striking in this scenario is that groups seem to be “impenetrable” from one another and that the “refusal” of settled people to ‘re-nomadise’ themselves indicates the fact that they “prefer” their own culture rather than adopt a radically different way of life, despite any satisfaction it might give them, individually. Settled culture, once it is formed, is never abandoned, whatever the prejudice endured by the individuals who make up this culture.

Besides, Zerzan knows this case of the contact between settled groups and hunter-gatherers, since he quotes the example of settled people who resort to the help of hunter-gatherers to pull them through in times of food shortages. However he does not reach any conclusions as to his “refusal” thesis, whether it is a matter of trying to prove it or to call it into question. In fact, Zerzan never draws a single conclusion, since a conclusion is the fruit of reasoning and that he seems to be allergic to all reasoning. He contents himself with quoting the conclusions of others, or at least the conclusions that please him most.

With the passage to the Neolithic one notices a real “revolution”, as it is usual to say. One can equally speak, in a less implied manner, of a gigantic rupture. A way of life, which remained more or less stable, at least in its broad lines, during 2.5 million years, transforms itself brutally in another way of life that, by pursuing its evolution,

ends up by becoming radically different. All this was not done naturally in one day, but the rapidity of progression of the Neolithic rupture is, in the face of the slowness" of the Palaeolithic, nearly exponential. Three to four thousand years were enough to generalize it.

Zerzan points out, by quoting Binford that "the question to ask is not why agriculture did not develop everywhere but rather why it developed in the first place." And this is really the question, to which our ideologue is careful not to try to answer. In order to do so we would need to put to one side the purely negative question of "refusal", and to start getting into the details when in fact, it is well-known that "the devil lies in the details", that it to say doubt and difficulties. One ought to start speaking of the climatic factors, of demography, of the very structure of pre-Neolithic societies, and of a heap of other things not too poetic. It is to be noted all the same that the passage to the Neolithic era remains quite mysterious in the current state of knowledge. There are as usual, only theories. There is the theory of a climatic change having modified profoundly the human environment, which would have driven humans to adapt by practicing agriculture. One can oppose to this theory the fact that during 3 million years, there have been enough climatic changes of this kind to permit about fifteen Neolithic revolutions", which have however evidently not taken place.

On the relations of man and his environment, we have here interesting elements. As early as the middle Acheulian era (between 400 000 and 300 000 years ago), at the boundary between erectus and archaic sapiens during the Riss glaciations, one observes the same progression in the size of tools (the famous Acheulian handaxe which Zerzan speaks highly about), whether it is in Europe, Africa, or the Near East. This signifies therefore that we have here a similar culture, which evolves, at least in its technical aspect, independently from the constraints of the natural environment.

The much-vaunted "harmony with nature" is thus seriously put in question. The natural environment seems in fact to act very little on Palaeolithic cultures, even if these cultures do not yet bring pressure to bear massively, as with during the Neolithic, on the natural environment. But "rupture", at least in an underlying way, is more or less sealed. That is to say that human evolution is more conditioned from the start by its own social structures than by the influence on the natural environment.

It is equally interesting to note that in this framework, the ideas of Marx on the "mastery of nature" which have contributed to the foundation of the progressive ideology of the old workers' movement, are equally called into question, but in a different manner than Zerzan's. The domination of nature is not inscribed in the destiny of human societies. When men carve tools, they do not seek to master "inert matter", but to produce that which their societies need. They do not seek straightaway to master the natural environment which they found as it was during the entire Paleolithic era, that does not mean that they were more in "harmony" with it than later with the rearing of animals and agriculture. One could say almost that the "natural milieu" does not exist for human societies, if one was not afraid of lapsing into an extrapolation *A la Zerzan*. Human societies seem in any case to aim more to their own conservation,

to the upholding of their own structures, than to the domination of the surrounding environment. What took place during the Neolithic era, is that the conservation of the social structures went through the domination of the natural environment, domination that brought about in turn the creation of new structures. This domination was not therefore the aim of humanity (its “historical task” like the one of the proletariat would be of making the revolution), but the consequence of a new socialization.

According to this theory, the passage from the Neolithic period thus would neither be an adaptation to the constraints of the environment, nor, as Zerzan seems to suggest it — a kind of conspiracy of the Spirit of Domination against the Spirit of Freedom, but a mutation linked to a modification of social structure itself. To what can we attribute this modification? The most probable factor is an internal social factor but also a “natural” one (although one could seriously discuss the “natural” aspect of this factor for human societies), namely the demographic increase.

It is known that the societies of hunter-gatherers, when the internal tensions or the pressure on the environment become too great, “split-up” to form another group. One can imagine that at this given time, demography, having become too important in order to allow this “split”, the process of settlement then imposed itself as the best possible solution. One would have here, with the construction of “permanent” houses, the first appearance of “private” spaces, which allow the tensions within the group to be limited without however having recourse to a “split”, which had become problematic.

This thesis implies that humans initially were settled, and would have practiced much later the rearing of animals and agriculture. One can back it up archaeologically thanks to the Natoufian sites, in the region of Syria-Palestine, which date back to about 10 000 years, thus at the very beginning of the Neolithic period. The Natoufians used to build permanent houses, but did not practice, at least at the beginning of their settlement, neither agriculture nor the rearing of animals. In fact they still had recourse essentially to gathering and to a lesser degree hunting. But the village had become their essential anchoring point. They were still hunter-gatherers, but settled. And as they nourished themselves essentially with wild cereals, one can suppose that it is the stocking of these seeds in fixed premises that made agriculture possible. One can equally think that a village of this kind must have drawn on all sorts of animals, some of which maybe progressively domesticated themselves.

However that may be, this type of site seems to confirm the thesis of settlement initiated by the modification of certain social structures, a “revolution” brought about by the danger incurred by human societies for not being able to reproduce previous socialization. Paradoxically, one could say that the Neolithic period appeared because of the attempt by Paleolithic society to safeguard itself. The Neolithic revolution was first the instrument of this new socialization, which would bring about the consequences that we know.

However that may be, we are in this model and it is worth what it is worth but which presents, all the same, the advantage of being able to be proven really faraway from Zerzan’s thesis of “refusal”.

We are going to leave “Future Primitive” to concern ourselves quickly with the other collection of articles by Zerzan, “Elements of Refusal”. The ideology of Zerzan is essentially based on the conception that he imagines of the early time of humanity. We have proven quite clearly that this conception was biased, partial, and that the central thesis of “refusal” rested on nothing. In this case, what remains of “Future Primitive”? Not much. Almost everything in it is set out in the book of Marshall Sahlins’s “Stone age Economics”. One will gain more by reading it. To take apart “Future Primitive” there was no need to be a specialist of prehistory, or anything else for that matter. Without much preliminary knowledge, a week’s work, a bit of logic, and a sole book of reference, “l’Introduction a la Prehistoire” by G. Camps, accompanied by “Dictionnaire de la Prehistoire” by Leroi-Gourhan, was enough for us. Anyone else could have done it. Zerzan has in all likelihood bet on the fact that no one would do it. That is to say he bet on the ignorance and the lack of curiosity of his readers. He has essentially bet on the fact that his word would be believed. This attitude falls within the lowest realm of propaganda.

II. At the Source of Alienation: an ideological mix

Before turning our attention to the “content” of the Zerzanian ideology, let us have a look at the form. What is striking, when one glances through his books, is the mass of quotes he uses. Thus, in “Elements of Refusal” (We will use the initials “E.R.”), there are about 300 of them, which make it roughly three quotes per page. When one uses such a mass of quotes, it is either scrupulous to a degree, whether to impress the reader by one’s knowledge which will enable us to know more than him or to have the last word. We have all come across this kind of character, who puts up a kind of wall of culture between himself and the person he is talking to, who retreats behind this wall, to avoid disclosing who he is, and to dominate the other person with the help of the instrument of culture used as a bludgeon.

Zerzan makes use of quotes in order to give to his otherwise disjointed discourse, an appearance of scientific character. Moreover, he makes use of the authors he quotes as the ventriloquist does his puppets: one moment they appear, say what one makes them say, and disappear. The authors thus quoted present equally the advantage of credibility: since so and so said it, it is useless to discuss it. Never does he prove what the authors put forward, the quotes are always outside the context, and above all outside of all reasoning. Zerzan never produces any reasoning, he never proves anything: he shows off words. As in “Future Primitive”, he practices the terrorism of evidence.

At the beginning of the book, he can “declare at once an intention and a strategy: technological society will only be dissolved (and stopped from recycling itself) only by canceling time and history.” A vast programme, admittedly. The man does not lack ambition; no one would contemplate reproaching him for it. But what does all that mean? How does he intend to do it alone, or with others? And what others? One does

not know. Neither is this “intention” nor this strategy subsequently developed. It is quite disappointing, but quite in keeping with the Zerzanian hotchpotch: he says one thing, then jumps to another, an association of ideas, association which drives him towards another, and so forth. This method naturally makes him go round in circles. He gets going again with quote upon quote, from one remark to another, and at the end of his text one has not moved an inch, and for a very good reason: everything was already there, from the beginning. And as he never calls anything into question, everything can only remain as it was. To our knowledge, this is the very definition of “reification”, a Marxist concept of which he makes an abundant use. Zerzan goes round and round in the night, and he consumes nothing other than his time, which he would do better spending on something else.

This absence of method is equally one of the foundations of his ideology. It is a question of an ideology of the refusal of logic, as “alienated consciousness”, which he expresses by quoting Horkheimer and Adorno: “Even the deductive form of science expresses hierarchy and coercion” (“E.R.” p.36). Why not, but then, why so many quotations of a scientific origin? Zerzan does not mind using the discoveries of science, when it suits him, but refuses the scientific method, as too restricting, or as “antinatural”. He is in this, similar to all the other consumers, who want the supermarkets without the mad cow, electricity in all rooms without the danger of nuclear power stations, and two bangers per household without the oil slicks.

Logic and deduction are maybe imperfect tools, and certainly impregnated by the ideology of our culture, but poor us, they are all we have at our disposal. Without these tools, these methods, we would have never known anything of the conditions of life of the first humans, and Zerzan would have been condemned to keep quiet which he seems visibly to aspire to. Besides no one prevents him from doing so.

Like all consumers, Zerzan wants to “live in the present”, in the rainbow-coloured movement of life”. Try and repeat these words three times in a row without laughing: “the rainbow-coloured movement” is rather that of the series of video-clips on MTV. At best, he recalls a bunch of Hippies with coloured bandanas tumbling down a slope in bloom to the tune of the Little House on the Prairie, and ending up crashing into the rubbish tip down below.

The affinity of Zerzan for the spontaneity of the Hippies, he asserts it himself on p.20 of “E.R.”: “Fortunately, also in the 60s many others were beginning the unlearning of how to live in history, as evidenced by the shedding of wristwatches, the use of psychedelic drugs, and, paradoxically perhaps, by the popular single-word slogan of the French insurrectionists of May 1968: “Quick!”

Must we go back over the known introduction by the American secret services of psychedelic drugs on American campuses? Must we go back again over the catastrophe that these much-vaunted “youth movements” of the 60s, which had an effect of establishing a new specialised class of consumer, and thus to open new markets to post-Fordism, whilst maintaining society in its moronic state on a long-term basis. And this “Quick!” of 68, what is it other than the advertisement of the debilitating

patience of consumers of fast-food, video clips, and of the pre-digested thought with a Zerzan sauce?

Zerzan would like to make us believe that we are alienated by the empire of reason. And indeed, the capitalist world is dominated by the logic of the economy, and more concretely by the vital necessity for the ever-increasing extraction of surplus value. But this dominant rationality is served on a world of individuals more and more deprived of all the tools of reason, on the impoverishment of language to the profit of its ersatz media, and on illiteracy that is developing in all sorts of ways. Capitalist society impoverishes us not only materially, but also intellectually. What Debord called: “the loss of all appropriate language to facts” is one of the aspects of the capitalist misery, and one of these aspects that establishes best its domination. We must struggle against this impoverishment. Zerzan appeals to even more mental poverty. He himself sets an example with his texts, miserable mince of previous texts, real “zappings” of thought. The “thought” of Zerzan is a pure product of contemporary alienation.

III. Communism cannot be “primitive”

The ideology of Zerzan is but the sudden appearance of an old primitivist romanticism, which goes back to Rousseau and even, before him, to Montaigne (cf “Essays, on Cannibals”). It rests on the postulate that our culture would be “bad”, because it would have lost “contact with nature” which makes for “the authenticity” (“Lolantics, are some flowers which grow in books”, as Pagnol made the poor Ugolin say) of primitive cultures. This attitude is the one of an inverted colonialism, which would make our culture out to be the only “real” culture, which is to say evil incarnate.

We have seen previously that, from the start, humanity did not “free itself from the constraints of the natural environment”, as would say a marxo-utilitarian conception of societies, but developed as though independently from it. This does not signify that men live without ties with their environment, which would be absurd, but rather it is the symbolic structure of human societies that condition their relationship with the natural environment, and not the opposite. One cannot thus from then on speak of “proximity” or “estrangement” from nature, at any time in human history, but only of different types of relationships that men maintain with their societies, of their way of life in the widest sense of the word. To present the life of hunter-gathers as more “natural” than the one of settled people has thus no meaning. The simple fact that the hunter-gatherers did not have an easier life, with more “leisure time” and more “free” sociability than settled people is not an argument in itself. Besides, there are settled societies, practicing agriculture, who have a “leisure time” very comparable to the one of the hunter-gatherers, by practicing sub-exploitation and by maintaining a low density of population. One can mention the Chimbu from New Guinea, who exploit only 60% of the land suitable for cultivation, the Yagaw from the Philippines or the Iban from Borneo who maintain their population from 30% to 50% under the

density that a more extensive agriculture would allow them. In these cultures, one can observe very short “working days”. With the Kapaulca Papuans, men would dedicate on average 2 hours I 8 minutes per day to agricultural production, and women 1 hour 42 minutes. There are other examples that it would be tedious to quote. Agriculture, contrary to the simplistic equations of the kind agriculture/animal rearing mastery of nature = social domination, is not therefore the bearer of “absolute evil” that Zerzan would like to detect.

There will also be without doubt the ones determined to search for Evil who will want to find it in stocking (a manifestation of the consciousness of time and of number”, according to Zerzan), this being supposedly the prefiguration of capitalist accumulation, and the outset in human life of the sin of avarice. Alas, it equally turns out that a number of hunter-gatherers also practiced stocking, as one can easily imagine. Unless you take primitive people to be imbeciles, one would have trouble in believing that they are going to content themselves by gathering what they find, satisfying their immediate hunger to lie down blissfully afterwards in the shade of the big Banana Tree of Plenty. Acorns, nuts and wild chestnuts would be on the contrary collected by the hunter-gatherers in baskets (the late appearance of pottery does not signify that one was unaware previously of all other containers, but only that we no longer have traces of these woven containers, made from perishable materials) and put out to dry, in anticipation of consumption later. The Zerzanian notion of the “perpetual present” takes a blow; this indicates an anticipation of needs over the long-term and putting in place a strategy to attain it.

However that maybe, absolute Evil is neither to be found in stocking, neither in agriculture, nor in the more or less complex or “abstract” organisational forms (What is more complex or “abstract” than the systems of transversal lineage of kinship in certain “primitive cultures”), and even less in the consciousness of time, mathematics or in language. In fact) there is no “absolute Evil”. Let us stop being moralistic.

Zerzan is a fierce enemy of all organization. For him, all action concentrated and orientated with a precise goal is bound to end up alienated. He sees sorcerers everywhere. What repulses him in modern societies is principally this organisation. That it is presently alienated is without doubt. For all that, must one subscribe to this silly anarchism, which sees in all regrouping of more than three people, a factor of domination or alienation?

Zerzan speaks of “a face-to-face society”, of a “society of lovers”. Here he rejoins T. Kaczynski, called Unabomber, who in his Manifesto, declares that “the individual” is frustrated by what he calls his “self-accomplishment” “when the collective decisions are taken by too extensive a group in order for the role of each to have the slightest importance.” Zerzan dreams of the hunter-gatherers, Kaczynski of the men of the Conquest of the West: in all cases, little isolated groups, with a very weak rate of population growth.

This ideology shows a very characteristic desire of mass individualism: the desire of self-actualisation, the desire for recognition by others. This desire reflects a very

real emptiness, but, a product of alienation, it speaks its language. It is the separate human being who expresses himself here, because in his separation, all that he has is his own solitude, what he calls his individuality. Deprived as we are of all conscious collective action, we do not even succeed to imagine that such an action be possible.

One must assert on the contrary that such an action is possible, and that it is possible because, at the point that we find ourselves today, it is necessary. The “face-to-face society”, the society of “little groups” are the products of wounded individualism, of the isolated “vegetable” who wants to exist “for and by himself”, with some pals. The problems that capitalism presents today, and that will not be solved because we alone, as a human community, are capable of resolving them, will not be resolved at the level of the “small group”. When for example, once the revolution is done (which no doubt will be soon, of course) we will occupy ourselves to re-afforest intelligently the millions of hectares devastated by industrial agriculture, which will not be done by the action of ‘small isolated groups’. And it as an individual I have the good fortune to participate in this collective action, I will be quite indifferent to inscribing my name on each tree I will have planted, and that besides, without doubt I will not see reaching maturity. I will not feel less an individual for that.

In fact, what Zerzan and Kaczynski suggest, is the very democratic idea according to which the organisation of human groups by themselves would be impossible, because of today’s scale of population. Like all the democrats they do not conceive at all that a society composed of billions of individuals could be “managed” differently than it is today, that is to say by States, by representation, by heavy policing.

They do not conceive human community as a supersession of the actual conditions and of all the situations of the past, but as a regression towards this past. And their thought, which claims to be revolutionary, constitutes effectively a regression.

But the object of this text is not to put forward a new theory of revolution. We simply intended to criticize the ideologue Zerzan, and we consider that it is done. We also wanted a debate on concrete bases. The bases are there; the debate can now take place.

Alain C., with the invaluable support of Marielle January 2000

The Ted K Archive

Alain C.
John Zerzan and the primitive confusion
2000

Retrieved on December 22, 2009 from
<libcom.org/library/john-zerzan-primitive-confusion-en-attendant>
This pamphlet was originally published as an article in the review “En Attendant”, 5
rue du Four, 54000 Nancy, France.

Translated from the French by Nicolas Holliman and Michel Prigent on 16th
September 2000

Printed and published on 20th September 2000 to coincide with a talk at the Conway
Hall, London on 22nd September 2000 [The organisers changed the date of the
meeting to 23rd].

2nd Edition with corrections 14th October 2000. French version at Ab Irato.

Alternative share link: <https://usa.anarchistlibraries.net/library/alain-c-john-zerzan-and-the-primitive-confusion>

www.thetedkarchive.com