

Review: Twilight of the Machines

Aragorn!

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Twilight of the Machines
John Zerzan
Feral House (2008)
142 pages. Paper, \$12

The publication of another John Zerzan book will likely be responded to in entirely predictable ways by the majority of the anarchist milieu. Anyone who is not interested in green anarchist or anti-civilization thought will dismiss the book out of hand. It is a non-event. Similarly, since John is the best known North American anarchist, there will be those who turn to the book as a *State of the state-haters*, seeing it as something Zerzan has never claimed to be, but perhaps is needed. Like his other books, *Twilight of the Machines* is another collection of Zerzan's articles from his magazine *Green Anarchy*, *Species Traitor* and this magazine.

For us this serves as an opportunity to revisit the role that primitivism is currently taking in anti-civilization thought and how Zerzan is serving in his role as its guardian. Using Zerzan's definition, the difference between primitivism and other libratory theories (green or otherwise) is apparent.

A (misleadingly-named) "Man the Hunter" conference at the University of Chicago in 1966 launched the reversal of the Hobbesian view, which for centuries had provided ready justification for all the repressive institutions of a complex, imperializing Western culture. Supporting evidence for the new paradigm has come forth... and now form[s] the theoretical basis for everything from undergraduate course[s] to field research. Archaeologists continue to uncover examples of how our Paleolithic forbears led mainly peaceful, egalitarian, and healthy lives for about two million years.

The challenge is to disprove George Grant's thesis that we live in "a world where only catastrophe can slow the unfolding of the potentialities of technique" and to actualize Claude Koroouh's judgment that revolution can only be redefined against progress. (107–108)

The thematic elements of Zerzan's thought can be seen here. A use of apocalyptic imagery along with a deep ambivalence toward catastrophe itself, a fascination with the exposition of the ideologies of Archaeology and Anthropology, and a preference for a pastoral way of life. These themes continue to be timely and barely explored due to bickering about implications that Zerzan has not made and doesn't show much sympathy for — like mass die off; going "back to the land" (especially as a revolutionary practice); any other Khmer Rouge-like dystopic practices that might be imagined after hearing about anarcho-primitivism; the critique of domestication, civilization, and technology. These complaints are distractions that, mostly, ignore what Zerzan actually is interested in and transform the conversation that he is trying to have into one that is more salacious, simplistic, and barren.

Anthropology

At its core (and even in its self-definition) anthropology is a humanist discipline. To the extent that Zerzan is also a humanist he uses (his predilection toward) anthropology to make the case about the kind of society he finds appealing. To the extent that he is not a humanist, or breaks with some tenets of humanism, he is interested in taking a central anthropological question in a more philosophical direction. This is the question of origins.

It seems that his interest in origins, at least in *Twilight of the Machines*, continues to be two-fold. First, and primarily, that the laundry list of “Big Issues” that radicals have with the existing order can be explained by a sort of *first anthropology*, an examination of how things were before the qualitative break called Civilization.

In the context of the generally egalitarian ethos of hunter-gatherer or foraging societies, anthropologists... have described a generally equal relationship between men and women. In such settings where the person who procures something also distributes it and where women procure about 80 percent of the sustenance, it is largely women who determine band society movements and camp locations. Similarly, evidence indicates that both woman and men made the stone tools used by pre-agricultural peoples. (12)

More speculative is an idea that Zerzan has been touching on since *Elements of Refusal* (CAL Press 1999) with his essay “Language: Origin and Meaning,” which is about the origin of alienation itself.

Within radical circles alienation is a code word containing a lot of sub-text that can be missed on first introduction. Alienation, in particular, is coded with a Marxist idea about how workers are alienated from their creation by the capitalists’ ownership of the means of production and ownership of the product of that workers labor. In the young Marx, alienation has a more theoretical definition that remains a central term used by (and a concern of) both anti-state communists and Zerzan (whose background as a Marxist can’t be understated). Alienation is the action by which people (and groups) become alien to the results of their own activity, the environment in which that activity occurs, to the people who share that environment and activity, and to themselves.

Most anti-state communist interest in alienation remains firmly focused on the economy, economic relations, and how to engage in the midst of economic tension to affect social change. Here is Zerzan’s innovation: Instead of following the Marxist line of eternal fascination with alienation as simply synonymous with economic relationships, he looks to other human endeavors, in particular to pre-industrial, pre-capitalist **world-building** that seems to have led to the current economic alienation. The question for Zerzan and the anarcho-primitivists he has inspired is “Where did alienation begin?” Their answer appears to be with the creation of symbolic thought and the culture that arose as a result.

Kevin Tucker: How would you distinguish symbolic culture and symbolic thought, and what is their relation to civilization? **John Zerzan:** What followed after the species began to symbolize constitutes symbolic culture. This ethos has come to define what thinking is, and the sensual part of experience has to [sic] greatly given way to symbolic experience; that is, direct experience is being reduced toward zero point... Symbolic culture in the forms of art and religion, for example, involve re-presented reality being thus processed as substitute for direct experience. They emerge as societies begin to develop inequalities that express themselves in specialized roles and realms of separate authority. (51)

For non-primitivist anarchists who are also interested in anthropology as a way to talk about human history, the frustration is how rigid the anarcho-primitivist view of anthropology seems to be. Rather than critically evaluate all of anthropology for the use of anarchists, anarcho-primitivists have chosen a view of egalitarian gatherer-hunters that is defined by a school of anthropologists who are in honest contention with others about their perspective and the evaluation of the same evidence. If it is possible to come to different conclusions based on the same evidence, then the reason that you choose one — especially if you call it *the* right one — has little to do with the evidence itself. In the case of Zerzan, the reasons aren't stated directly. Obliquely he reacts most strongly to the extreme stylization and rapaciousness of techno-industrial culture, and has clearly been influenced by the green direct action milieu that has been active around his home in the Pacific Northwest over the past 20 years. But this doesn't seem to be enough to explain his particular affinity towards Sahlins' position against Obeyesekere's in the conflict between anthropologists.

Our concern isn't for one set of views within anthropology verses another. The utility of anthropology for anarchists looking for a practice or a theory is marginal at best. Our concern is that an exploration about origins (which is worthwhile) should have so much to do with the discourse of any academic discipline. Anthropology just happens to be the choice of one set of anarchists; economics is the choice of another group, while sociology, philosophy, multicultural studies, etc, reflect the preferences of others. All of these disciplines have things to offer any critical thinker, but it indicates a naivety and lack of imagination for any anarchist to act as a popularizer of, or advocate for, positions that originate in the academy (with the biases). This continues to be the hallmark of far too many anarchists.

Genocide

When asked by an anthropologist what the Indians called America before the white man came, an Indian said simply, 'Ours.'

— Vine Deloria Jr.

There are many different origin stories we can explore. We can explore our origins with the nation-building intention of constructing a narrative of our great journey from and back to a homeland, we can use origins to tell ourselves a story about all of natural history beginning in a garden somewhere along the river Nile, or about great leaders, or struggles.

What differentiates Zerzan's origins story from these others is that it is not just a story about an appealing society, but an articulation of the desire for that society that is a-political:

It is becoming too obvious that what bars our way is our failure to put an end to the reigning institutions and illusions. We must allow ourselves to see what has happened to us, including the origins of the disaster. At the same time we realize that true revolt is inspired by the realization that it is not impossible to bring the disaster to a halt, to imagine and strike out in new directions — to find our way back home. (125)

Politics has become a four-letter word among many anarchists. The term can be useful short-hand to differentiate an anarchist from someone who is merely apathetic about politics-as-usual. It has also become the code word of activists to justify their self-sacrifice in the non-profit-industrial complex or at sub-retail booksellers. In addition, it can evoke a world of danger, of general strikes and insurrections; but, in most forms, it ends up looking like marches, protests, and hope blocs. Here Zerzan is on point. To find our way home we are going to have to follow a different path than that of institutions and illusions.

What is the experience that distinguishes nearly all of us and could, and should, rightfully be called the origin story of this civilization? This experience is genocide, the deliberate destruction of a multi-generational social body. Especially on this continent, every social body has a story of systematic violence, amnesia, and denial that has shaped them into a form that can be called civilized. This is true of those who were captured, enslaved, and brought here to live in servitude for generations, those who escaped to here only to be assimilated within generations, those who fled from famine, or the majority of people who no longer remember their people's creation story.

The spectacular genocides of the twentieth century have put a bad taste into the mouths of people (politicians) who otherwise totally agree with the strategies employed but who, politely, believe that they should be practiced over generations and with many of the trappings of consent. What is the difference between forced migrations and concentration camps other than the size of the body count? Or between a Native American boarding school and a reeducation camp, except for the use of charitable language around helping poor children? What is the difference between blood quantum laws (contemporary, United States) and Genetic Health Courts (1933–45, Germany), other than which side of the historical moment we are on? What is the difference between Americanization and genocide?

For most of us, reaching back in time (behind the systematic removal of our memories of ourselves, our choices, and our terrains) can only be done through the mechanisms introduced by European Enlightenment thought. Discussing “home,” anarchy, or any sort of better world is done through literature, anthropology, or religious texts that, for all their positive traits, are also designs conceived of after our multicultural social forms have been destroyed. The ground that our memory is built upon is post-apocalyptic. The path from there to here is not only a story of horror; complicating matters is that it has now become invisible because we have been convinced that this story isn’t true, that it never happened.

There are exceptions to this amnesiac society. There are groups, small and shrinking, of people who have lived contiguously and were not entirely erased. That have continued to live. To survive. If we hold a position that the lifeways of these people are a model for a better way of life, then why isn’t our highest priority getting to know about them, interacting with those who are available to teach us, and establishing ourselves along the path of their contiguous experience rather than living in our post-apocalyptic one? The civilized task of genocide has not been completed. There are real live non-civilized people who could aid and teach another generation on the specifics of what it would take to live differently.

Zerzan appears to be calling for a different approach.

Where do we look for rescue? Our predicament points us toward a solution. The crisis of modernity is, in a very basic sense, a failure of vision in which our disembodied life-world has lost its “place” in existence. We no longer see ourselves within the webs and cycles of nature. The loss of a direct relationship to the world terminates a once universal human understanding of our oneness with the natural world. The principle of relatedness is at the heart of indigenous wisdom: traditional intimacy with the world as the immanent basis of spirituality. This understanding is an essential and irreplaceable foundation of human health and meaningfulness. (124)

There is a clear disconnect, using the terminology of sympathetic anthropology, between proselytizing a lifeway assumed to be held by real living people and not relying on those people’s own understanding of what that lifeway is, or how to live it. Perhaps it is a kind of heroism. Unlike the rest of the anti-civilization crowd, anarcho-primitivists actually state clearly “this is what we want” without caring about whether this has much basis in a living multi-generational people’s experience, rather than the maintenance of a purely intellectual opposition to what is — without particular regard to the implications or efficacy.

The counter-cultural fascination with Native Americans in the 1960s and ‘70s is certainly a warning to urban anarchists who may conclude that direct learning from another culture is a great idea. It should be painfully obvious, but it bears repeating, that not all members of a cultural or ethnic group have the same motivation, experience, or patience in dealing with members of another group. This is especially true

if one group has been short-changed, while the other group represents socio-economic privilege, expectation (of knowledge and hospitality), and is not resolute in their own motivations. People are not ideas and do not conform to the expectations we might have of them. Dilettantes aren't as fascinating.

Somewhere in this tension between the lessons (that should have been) learned from the '70s and the need that North American anarchists and radicals have to link up with multi-generational social bodies is a — if not **the**, — practice for the 21st century.

It's an all or nothing struggle. Anarchy is just a name for those who embrace its promise of redemption and wholeness, and try to face up to how far we'll need to travel to get there. We humans once had it right, if the anthropologists are to be believed. Now we'll find out if we can get it right again. Quite possibly our last opportunity as a species. (68)

Zerzan is not calling for this practice. He is a town crier informing us that danger is on the horizon. Danger is upon us! And we, urban, civilized, educated people, are the danger. Our loneliness, our need for pharmaceuticals, our obsession with technological toys... these are all signs of the corruption of the totality. We are the problem and, at best, it is only our self-aware effort to pull back from the abyss that will save, if not this civilization then, humanity from utter annihilation.

What Zerzan continues to miss is that for the bulk of humanity, including civilized people, this apocalypse has already happened. We are currently the over-populated survivors of total destruction, blinking in the sunlight of our own loss, wandering aimlessly for food and shelter. For people who come from multi-generational social bodies, the effort is merely to wait out the situation until those of us from the post-apocalypse find our way to them or fade into memory.

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