

# Enemy of the State: An Interview with John Zerzan

September 1, 1998

**DJ:** What is Anarchism?

**JZ:** I would say Anarchism is the attempt to eradicate all forms of domination. This includes not only such obvious forms as the nation-state, with its routine use of violence and the force of law, and the corporation, with its institutionalized irresponsibility, but also such internalized forms as patriarchy, racism, homophobia. Also it is the attempt to expose the ways our philosophy, religion, economics, and other ideological constructions perform their primary function, which is to rationalize or naturalize—make seem natural—the domination that pervades our way of life: the destruction of the natural world or of indigenous peoples, for example, comes not as the result of decisions actively made and actions pursued, but instead, so we convince ourselves, as a manifestation of Darwinian selection, or God’s Will, or economic exigency. Beyond that, Anarchism is the attempt to look even into those parts of our everyday lives we accept as givens, as parts of the universe, to see how they, too, dominate us or facilitate our domination of others. What is the role of division of labor in the alienation and destruction we see around us? Even more fundamentally, what is the relationship between domination and time, numbers, language, or even symbolic thought itself?

The place where this definition gets a little problematic is that some Anarchists see some things as dominating, and some don’t. For example, some Anarchists don’t see the technological imperative as a category of domination. I do, and more and more Anarchists are finding themselves taking this anti-technological position. The further we follow this path of the technicization of both our interior and exterior lives, fewer and fewer Anarchists—and this is true as well of people who don’t call themselves Anarchists—valorize technology and production and progress and the categories of modern technological life.

Back to the definition. Most fundamentally I would see Anarchism as a synonym for anti-authoritarianism.

**DJ:** Isn’t all this just tilting at windmills? Has such a condition ever existed, where relations have not been based on domination?

**JZ:** That was the human condition for at least 99 percent of our existence as a species, from well before the emergence of homo sapiens, probably all the way back for at least a couple of million years, until perhaps only 10,000 years ago, with the emergence of first agriculture and then civilization.

Since that time we have worked very hard to convince ourselves that no such condition ever existed, because if no such condition ever existed, it’s futile to work toward it now. We may as well then accept the repression and subjugation that define our way of living as necessary antidotes to “evil human nature.” After all, according to this line of thought, our pre-civilized existence of deprivation, brutality, and ignorance made authority a benevolent gift that rescued us from savagery.

Think about the images that come to mind when you mention the labels “cave man,” or “Neanderthal.” Those images are implanted and then invoked to remind us where we would be without religion, government, and toil, and are probably the biggest

ideological justifications for the whole van of civilization—armies, religion, law, the state—without which we would all live the brutal clichés of Hobbes.

The problem with those images, of course, is that they are entirely wrong. There has been a potent revolution in the fields of anthropology and archaeology over the past 20 years, and increasingly people are coming to understand that life before agriculture and domestication—in which by domesticating others we domesticated ourselves—was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health.

**DJ:** How do we know this?

**JZ:** In part through observing modern foraging peoples—what few we’ve not yet eliminated—and watching their egalitarian ways disappear under the pressures of habitat destruction and oftentimes direct coercion or murder. Also, at the other end of the time scale, through interpreting archaeological digs. An example of this has to do with the sharing that is now understood to be a keynote trait of non-domesticated people. If you were to study hearth sites of ancient peoples, and to find that one fire site has the remains of all the goodies, while other sites have very few, then that site would probably be the chief’s. But if time after time you see that all the sites have about the same amount of stuff, what begins to emerge is a picture of a people whose way of life is based on sharing. And that’s what is consistently found in pre-neolithic sites. A third way of knowing is based on the accounts of early European explorers, who again and again spoke of the generosity and gentleness of the peoples they encountered. This is true all across the globe.

**DJ:** How do you respond to people who say this is all just nutty Rousouvian noble savage nonsense?

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

**DJ:** But what about the Aztecs, or stories we’re told of headhunters or cannibals?

**JZ:** Considering that our culture is the only one to ever invent napalm or nuclear weapons, I’m not sure we’re in much of a moral place to comment on the infinitely smaller-scale violence of other cultures. But it’s important to note a great divide in the behavior of indigenous groups. None of the cannibal or headhunting groups—and certainly not the Aztecs—were true hunter-gatherers. They had already begun agriculture. It is now generally conceded that agriculture usually leads to a rise in labor, a decrease in sharing, an increase in violence, a shortening of lifespan, and so on. This is not to say that all agricultural societies are violent, but to point out that this violence is not by and large characteristic of true hunter-gatherers.

**DJ:** Can you define domestication?

**JZ:** It’s the attempt to bring free dimensions under control for self-serving purposes.

**DJ:** If things were so great before, why did agriculture begin?

**JZ:** That’s a very difficult question, because for so many hundreds of thousands of years, there was very little change, it was almost frozen. That’s long been a source of

frustration to scholars in anthropology and archaeology: how could there have been almost zero change for hundreds of thousands of years—the whole lower and middle paleolithic—and then suddenly at a certain point in the upper paleolithic there's this explosion, seemingly out of nowhere? You suddenly have art, and on the heels of that, agriculture. Virtual activity. Religion.

And what's especially striking, it seems to me, is that now we see that the intelligence of humanity a million years ago was equal to what it is now. Thomas Wynn, for example, argues this very persuasively. Recently there was a piece in *Nature* magazine of a new finding that humans may have been sailing and navigating around what is now Micronesia some 800,000 years ago. All of this means that the reason civilization didn't arise earlier had nothing to do with intelligence. The intelligence argument has always been both comforting and racist anyway, comforting in that it reduces the role of choice by implying that those who are intelligent enough to build a lifestyle like ours necessarily will, and racist in implying that even those humans alive today who live primitive lifestyles are simply too stupid to do otherwise. If they were just smart enough, the reasoning goes, they too could invent asphalt, chainsaws, and penitentiaries.

We also know that the transition didn't come because of population pressures. Population has always been another big puzzle: how did foraging humanity keep the population so low, when they didn't have technologies? Historically, it's been assumed they used infanticide, but that theory has been kind of debunked. I believe that in addition to the various plants they could use as contraceptives they were also much more in tune with their bodies.

But back to the question: Why was it stable for so long, and then why did it change so quickly? I think it was stable because it worked, and I think it changed finally because for many millenia there was a kind of slow slippage into division of labor. This happened so slowly—almost imperceptibly—that people didn't see what was happening, or what they were in danger of losing. The alienation brought about by division of labor—alienation from each other, from the natural world, from their bodies—then reached some sort of critical mass, giving rise to its apotheosis in what we've come to know as civilization. As to how civilization itself took hold, I think Freud nailed that one when he said that “civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means of power and coercion.” That's what we see happening today, and there's no reason to believe it was any different in the first place.

**DJ:** What's wrong with division of labor?

**JZ:** That depends on what you want out of life. If your primary goal is mass production, nothing at all. It's central to our way of life. Each person performs as a tiny cog in this big machine. If, on the other hand, your primary goal is relative wholeness, egalitarianism, autonomy, or an intact world, there's quite a lot wrong with it.

**DJ:** I don't understand.

**JZ:** Division of labor is generally seen, when even noticed at all, as a banality, a “given” of modern life. All we see around us would be completely impossible without this cornerstone of production. But that’s the point. Undoing all this mess will mean undoing division of labor.

I think that at base a person is not complete or free insofar as that person’s life and the whole surrounding setup depends on his or her being just some aspect of a process, some fraction of it. A divided life mirrors the basic divisions in society and it all starts there. Hierarchy and alienation start there, for example.

I don’t think anyone would deny the effective control that specialists or experts have in the contemporary world. And I don’t think anyone would argue that control isn’t increasing with ever-greater acceleration.

**DJ:** Such as in food production. I recently read that one out of every ten dollars Americans spend on food goes to RJR Nabisco. Four meat packers control 90 percent of meat processing. Eight corporations control half of the poultry industry. Ninety percent of all agrichemical and feed-grain industries are controlled by 2 percent of the corporations involved. And how many of us know how to raise our own food?

**JZ:** Exactly. And it’s not just food. It wasn’t that long ago you could make your own radio set. People used to do that all the time. Even ten years ago you could still work on your car. That is becoming increasingly difficult. So the world becomes more and more hostage to people with these specialized skills, and on the people who control specialized technologies. When you have to rely on others, when you don’t have the skills to do what’s needed in a general sense, you are diminished.

**DJ:** But humans are social animals. Isn’t it necessary for us to rely on each other?

**JZ:** I don’t want to make it seem like my model is to turn people into monads with no connection to others. Quite the opposite. But it’s important to understand the difference between the interdependence of a functioning community, and a form of dependence that comes from relying on others who have specialized skills you don’t. They now have power over you. Whether they are “benevolent” in its use is really beside the point.

**DJ:** This reminds me of something the Russian Anarchist Kropotkin wrote about revolution, that the question taking precedence over all others is that of bread. This is because scarcity of food is the strongest weapon with counterrevolutionary forces: by withholding food or creating a blockade, those in power can force people back into compliance.

**JZ:** In addition to the direct control by those who have specialized skills, there is a lot of mystification of those skills. Part of the ideology of modern society is that without it, you’d be completely lost, you wouldn’t know how to do the simplest thing. Well, humans have been feeding themselves for the past couple of million years, and doing it a lot more successfully and efficiently than we do now. The global food system is insane. It’s amazingly inhumane and inefficient. We waste the world with pesticides, herbicides, the effects of fossil fuels to transport and store foods, and so on, and literally

billions of people go their entire lives without ever having enough to eat. But few things are simpler than growing or gathering your own food.

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

**JZ:** Exactly.

**DJ:** How much division of labor do you believe we should jettison?

**JZ:** I think the appropriate question is, "How much wholeness for ourselves and the planet do we want?"

**DJ:** You mentioned earlier you see a relationship between time and domination.

**JZ:** Two things that come to mind. The first is that time is an invention, a cultural artifact, a formation of culture. It has no existence outside of culture. The second is that time is a pretty exact measure of alienation. And I believe that the present informs the past, or rather gives directions to looking at the origins of modern alienation.

**DJ:** How so?

**JZ:** Let's start at the present. Time has never been as palpable, as material, as it is now. It's never existed as a reification with so much presence. Everything in our lives is measured and ruled by time.

**DJ:** Even dreams, it occurs to me, as we force them to conform to a workaday world of alarm clocks and schedules.

**JZ:** It's really amazing when you think that it wasn't that long ago that time wasn't so disembodied, so abstract.

**DJ:** But wait a second. Isn't the tick, tick, tick of a clock about as tangible as you can get?

**JZ:** It becomes concrete. That's what reification means, when a concept is treated as a thing, even when it isn't really a thing, but just a concept. A second is nothing, and to grant it separate existence is counter to our experience of living. I really like what Levy-Bruhl wrote about this: "Our idea of time seems to be a natural attribute of the human mind. But that is a delusion. Such an idea scarcely exists where primitive mentality is concerned."

**DJ:** Which means...

**JZ:** Most simply, that they live in the present, as we all do when we're having fun. It has been said that the Mbuti of southern Africa believe that "by a correct fulfillment of the present, the past and the future will take care of themselves."

**DJ:** What a concept!

**JZ:** Of the North American Pawnee it was said that life has a rhythm but not a progression. Primitive peoples generally have no interest in birthdays or measuring their ages. As for the future, they have little desire to control what does not yet exist, just as they have little desire to control nature. That moment-by-moment joining with the flux and flow of the natural world of course doesn't preclude an awareness of the

seasons, but this in no way constitutes an alienated time consciousness that robs them of the present.

What I'm talking about is really hard for us to wrap our minds around, because the notion of time has been so deeply inculcated that it's sometimes hard to imagine it not existing.

**DJ:** You're not talking about just not measuring seconds...

**JZ:** I'm talking about time not existing. Time, as an abstract continuing "thread" that unravels in an endless progression that links all events together while remaining independent of them. That doesn't exist. Sequence exists. Rhythm exists. But not time. Part of this has to do with the notion of mass production and division of labor. Tick, tick, tick, as you said. Identical seconds. Identical people. Identical chores repeated endlessly. Well, no two occurrences are identical, and if you are living in a stream of inner and outer experience that constantly brings clusters of new events, each moment is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the moment before. The notion of time simply disappears.

**DJ:** I'm still confused.

**JZ:** You might try this: if events are always novel, then not only would routine be impossible, but the notion of time would be meaningless.

**DJ:** And the opposite would be true as well.

**JZ:** Exactly. Only with the imposition of time can we begin to impose routine. Freud was really clear on this. He repeatedly pointed out that in order for civilization—with alienation at its core—to take place, it first had to break the early hold of timeless and non-productive gratification. This happened, I believe, in two stages. First the rise of agriculture magnified the importance of time, and specifically reified cyclical time, with its periods of intense labor associated with sowing or reaping, and with the surplus of the harvest going to support those who ran the calendars: the priests. This was true of the Babylonians, and of the Mayans. In the West, the notion of cyclical time, which still maintained at least a bow toward the natural world with its connection to the rhythms of the days and seasons, gave way to linear time. This began with the rise of civilization, and really took hold near the start of the Christian era. And of course once you have linear time, you have history, then progress, then an idolatry of the future that sacrifices species, languages, cultures, and now quite possibly the entire natural world on the altar of some future. Once this was at least the altar of a utopian future, but we don't even have that to believe in anymore. The same thing happens in our personal lives, as we give up living in the moment in exchange for the hope of being able to live in the moment at some point in the future, perhaps after we retire, or maybe even after we die and go to heaven. This otherworldly emphasis on heaven, too, emerges from the unpleasantness of living in linear time.

**DJ:** It seems to me that linear time not only leads to habitat degradation, but also springs from it. If everything is in reasonable balance, you are still on cyclical time, or as you mention, not on time at all, but as soon as you begin degrading your habitat such that there are perceptible changes, you've entered historical time. When

I was young, there were many frogs. Now there are fewer. There were many songbirds. Now there are fewer. That's linear time. I can count the passage of years by counting clearcuts. Historical time will only cease once the last vestiges of our civilization cease to be, once the last steel beams of the last skyscrapers rust into dust, and once this current spasm of extinctions abates, and once again those who remain can enter a rhythm, a peace.

**JZ:** Yes.

Linear time then transformed itself with the introduction of the clock into mechanical time. All connection to the natural world or to the present was lost, subsumed to the tyranny of the machine and of production. The Church was central to this endeavor. The Benedictines, who ruled 40,000 monasteries at their height in the Middle Ages, helped to yoke human endeavor to the regular, collective beat and rhythm of the machine by forcing people to work "on the clock."

The fourteenth century saw the first public clocks, and also the division of hours into minutes and minutes into seconds. The increments of time were now as fully interchangeable as the standardized parts and work processes necessary for capitalism.

At every step of the way this subservience to time has been met with resistance. For example, in early fighting in France's July Revolution of 1830, all across Paris people began to spontaneously shoot at public clocks. In the 1960s, many people, including me, quit wearing watches.

**DJ:** For a while in my twenties, I asked visitors to take off their watches as they entered my home.

**JZ:** Even today children must be broken of their resistance to time. This was one of the primary reasons for the imposition of this country's mandatory school system on a largely unwilling public. School teaches you to be at a certain place at a certain time, and prepares you for life in a factory. It calibrates you to the system. Raoul Vaneigem has a wonderful quote about this: "The child's days escape adult time; their time is swollen by subjectivity, passion, dreams haunted by reality. Outside, the educators look on, waiting, watch in hand, till the child joins and fits the cycle of the hours."

Time is not only important sociologically and ecologically, but personally. If I can share another quote, it would be Wittgenstein's: "Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy."

**DJ:** You mentioned also that number alienates...

**JZ:** You count objects. You don't count subjects. When members of a large family sit down to dinner, they know immediately without counting whether someone is missing without counting. Counting only becomes necessary when you have homogenized things.

Not all peoples use systems of numbers. The Yanomame, for example, do not count past two. Obviously they are not stupid. But just as obviously, they have a different relationship with the natural world.

The first number system was almost undoubtedly used to measure and control domesticated flock or herd animals, as wild creatures became products to be harvested.



We next see mathematics being used in Sumer about 5000 years ago to facilitate business. Later, Euclid developed his geometry, literally meaning “land measuring,” explicitly to measure fields for reasons of ownership, taxation, and slave labor. Today the same imperative drives science, only now it is the entire universe we are trying to measure and enslave. Once again, this isn’t obscure Anarchist theory. Descartes himself, considered by many to be the father of modern science, declared that the aim of science is “to make us as masters and possessors of nature.” He also declared the universe a giant clockwork, tying these two forms of domination—numbers and time—back neatly together.

**DJ:** I’ve read that nazi death camps often had quotas to fill as to how many people they were to kill each day. Today National Forests have deforestation quotas, as they must “produce” a certain number of board feet. It’s long been clear to me that it’s easier to kill a number than an individual, whether we are talking about boxcars of untermenschen, millions of board feet of timber, or tons of fish.

Where does this leave us?

**JZ:** In a dying world. Alienated.

**DJ:** Alienated?

**JZ:** Marx defined alienation as being separated from the means of production. Instead of producing things to use, we are used by the system. I would take it a step further and say that to me it means estranged from our own experiences, dislodged from a natural mode of being. The more technicized and artificial the world becomes, and as the natural world is evacuated, there’s an obvious sense of being alienated from a natural embeddedness.

To refer again to a pre-domesticated state, I think people once were in touch with themselves as organisms in ways we can’t even comprehend. On the level of the senses, there are credible accounts of San hearing a single-engined plane seventy miles away, and seeing four of the moons of Jupiter with the unaided eye. And this connection of course extended to those around them: Laurens Van der Post stated that the San seemed to know what it actually felt like to be an elephant, a lion, an antelope, and so on. This connection was then reciprocated. There are scores if not hundreds of accounts by early European explorers describing the lack of fear shown by wild animals toward humans.

**DJ:** Just last year I came across an account by the eighteenth-century explorer Samuel Hearne, the first white man to explore northern Canada. He described Indian children playing with wolf pups. The children would paint the pups’ faces with vermilion or red ochre, and when they were done playing with them return them unhurt to the den. Neither the pups nor the pups’ parents seemed to mind at all.

**JZ:** Now we gun them down from airplanes. That’s progress for you.

**DJ:** More broadly, what has progress meant in practice?

**JZ:** Progress has meant the looming spectre of the complete dehumanization of the individual and the catastrophe of ecological collapse. I think there are fewer people who believe in it now than ever, but probably there are still many who perceive it

as inevitable. We're certainly conditioned on all sides to accept that, and we're held hostage to it, too. The idea now is to have everybody dependent on technology in an increasingly immiserated sense. In terms of human health, it means increasing dependence on technologies, but what we're supposed to forget is that the technologies created these problems in the first place. Not just cancers caused by chemicals. Nearly all diseases are diseases either of civilization, alienation, or gross habitat destruction.

**DJ:** I have Crohn's Disease, which is virtually unheard of in nonindustrialized nations, only becoming common as these nations industrialize. In all literal truth industrial civilization is eating away at my guts.

**JZ:** I think people are really starting to understand how hollow the progress myth has been. Maybe that's too sanguine. But the fruits of it are too hard to miss. In fact the system doesn't talk so much about progress anymore.

**DJ:** What new word has replaced it?

**JZ:** Inertia. This is it. Deal with it, or else get screwed. You don't hear so much now about the American Dream, or the glorious new tomorrow. Now it's a global race for the bottom as transnationals compete to see which can most exploit workers, most degrade the environment. That competition thing works on the personal level, too. If you don't plug into computers you won't get a job. That's progress.

**DJ:** Where does that leave us?

**JZ:** I'm optimistic, because never before has our whole lifestyle been revealed as much for what it is.

**DJ:** Having seen it, what is there to do?

**JZ:** The first thing is to question it, to make certain that part of the discourse of society—if not all of it—deals with these life and death issues, instead of the avoidance and denial that characterizes so much of what passes for discourse. And I believe, once again, that this denial can't hold up much longer, because there's such a jarring contrast between reality and what is said about reality. Especially in this country, I would say.

Maybe, and this is the nightmare scenario, that contrast can go on forever. The Unabomber Manifesto posits that possibility: people could just be so conditioned that they won't even notice there's no natural world anymore, no freedom, no fulfillment, no nothing. You just take your prozac everyday, limp along dyspeptic and neurotic, and figure that's all there is.

But the way to break through that, the way to break the monopoly of lies, is simply to break the monopoly of lies, and bring out the old emperor has no clothes bit in its reality, its fullness, in how awful it really is, and what is at stake. To contrast what is possible—what has been, and what could again someday be—with how miserable the present is and what the immediate future will bring.

Clearly if we don't break the monopoly of lies, in a few decades there won't be much left to fight for. Especially when you consider the acceleration of environmental degradation and personal dehumanization.

So it's doubly crucial that dialog includes these off-limits subjects of how bad things really are. We need to redefine the acceptable discourse of this society. To refer to the Unabomber again, he decided he had to kill people to bring up this suppressed point of view. And he forced them to publish it. The point here is not whether he was justified or not, but merely to reveal the level of denial. This denial is not going to be changed by little reforms, and the planet is not going to be saved by recycling. To think it will is just silly. Or no, it's not silly, it's criminal. We have to face what's going on. Once we've faced reality, then we can together figure out how to change it, how to completely transform it.

You asked, "What's progress?" Take a look.

We need to talk about alienation. That's the number one problem. Two days ago I read in the paper that the young have never smoked as much as they do now. All the anti-smoking programs in the world aren't going to overcome the alienation at the root of this and other addictions. Take the war on drugs. All the billboards and flashy videos and all that shit aren't going to help one bit, because we aren't doing anything about the conditions that produce it. So we're in this never-never land where at least some people think if you produce some hip stuff about smoking or dope you can change something. But it's more of the avoidance and denial. It's more of the problem.

What is the system that generates these malignant things? Let's talk about that, even though it's forbidden. Still it's forbidden to talk about the fundamental nature of the global system. Before we jump to what are the specific answers, the very first thing, the essential thing is just to face it as a question, to pose it as a question, to talk about it as a question. Otherwise it's pointless to talk about the tactics.

There's a debate going on in Earth First! now about the question of violence versus nonviolence. But I think even Earth First! is missing the point. I think people get so exercised about tactics because they haven't faced the more fundamental questions: what are we really trying to do? What's the overview? What's our grasp on things? What is the meaning of our work? Tactics arise organically in large part from your starting position. But if you don't want to talk about where you are, your talk of tactics is meaningless.

The place to start is by asking questions like: how can we make a radical break? Is what we're doing contributing to a radical break? Do we even want a radical break? Do we want to have a few more liberals, who will chop down a few fewer trees? Is that all we want?

**DJ:** I just wrote an article for Earth First! surrounding that same question: when is violence appropriate? My belief also is that this isn't the most basic question. The question I would ask is: to what depth do we feel the destruction in our bodies?

I have on my wall a news clipping headlined "Mother bear charges trains." I keep it because if we're able to perceive the situation deeply enough in our bodies—like the mother grizzly who charges the train that killed her sons—we will know precisely what to do. She didn't go into theoretical discussions of right and wrong; her response was embodied.

**JZ:** And it's the same for people who hate their jobs. If they would just reenter their bodies, they would know what they need to do.

**DJ:** I read accounts of the lives some people have—for example, miners who are underground from dawn to dusk day after day—and I wonder how they survive. So far as we know, we only get one life, and what the hell are you gonna do spending it all breaking your back?

**JZ:** Or causing others to break their backs. I was having a discussion about technological society with a few friends, and some of them were saying, “Well, we’ve got to have phones. We can’t do away with them.” And another friend responded, “Are you going to go down in the mines? Are you going to do that?” Because our whole lifestyle is predicated on someone having to slave his or her life away, or rather millions and millions of someones.

I wouldn’t go down there unless you put a gun to my head. And of course some people do have guns to their heads, because they don’t have as much flexibility as you or I do so far as surviving. But those of us who don’t have guns to our heads need to be aware of the bargains we make in order to live the way we do.

**DJ:** Let’s talk more about technology. Isn’t technology just driven by curiosity?

**JZ:** You hear people say this all the time: “You can’t put the genie back in the bottle”; “You’re asking people to forget.” Stuff like that. But that’s just another attempt to naturalize the craziness. And it’s a variant of that same old racist intelligence argument. Because the Hopi didn’t invent backhoes, they must not be curious. Sure, people are naturally curious. But about what? Did you or I aspire to create the neutron bomb? Of course not. That’s crazy. Why would people want to do that in the first place? They don’t. But the fact that I don’t want to create a neutron bomb doesn’t mean I’m not curious. Curiosity is not value free. Certain types of curiosity arise from certain types of mindsets, and our own “curiosity” follows the logic of alienation, not simple wonder, not learning something to become a better person. Our “curiosity,” taken as a whole, leads us in the direction of further domination. How could it do any other?

**DJ:** We may try to make better mousetraps—more efficient ways to kill small rodents—but I don’t see us working real hard to stop rape, child abuse, or global warming. Strange the things we apply this much-vaunted curiosity to.

Also, I think about friends. I want to learn about them so we can be better friends, not so I can utilize them more efficiently. That is true for humans and nonhumans alike.

**JZ:** We gotta hope this thing collapses.

**DJ:** Speaking of collapse, how do you see the future playing out?

**JZ:** I was talking to a friend about it this afternoon, and he was giving reasons why there isn’t going to be a good outcome, or even an opening toward a good outcome. I couldn’t say he was wrong, but as I mentioned before, I’m kind of betting that the demonstrable impoverishment on every level goads people into the kind of questioning we’re talking about, and toward mustering the will to confront it. Perhaps now we’re in the dark before the dawn. I remember when Marcuse wrote *One Dimensional Man*. It

came out in about 1964, and he was saying that humans are so manipulated in modern consumerist society that there really can be no hope for change. And then within a couple of years things got pretty interesting, people woke up from the fifties to create the movements of the sixties. I believe had he written this book a little later it would have been much more positive.

Perhaps the 60s helped shape my own optimism. I was at the almost perfect age. I was at Stanford, in college, and then I moved to Haight Ashbury, and Berkeley was across the Bay. I got into some interesting situations just because I was in the right place at the right time. I agree with people who say the sixties didn't even scratch the surface, but you have to admit there was something going on. And you could get a glimpse, a sense of possibility, a sense of hope, that if things kept going, there was a chance of us finding a different path.

They didn't, but I still carry that possibility, and it warms me, even though thirty years later things are frozen, and awful.

Sometimes I'm amazed that younger people can do anything, or have any hope, because I'm not sure they've seen any challenge that has succeeded even partially.

**DJ:** Certainly none coming from the environmental movement.

**JZ:** I have that amazing boost in my life and my psyche that younger people don't. And I am so very impressed at the capacity for hope among the young.

**DJ:** Some say that the 60s were the last big burst, the last gasp, and from then on it's been downhill.

**JZ:** I sometimes think of it that way, like it was the Big Bang, and everything's been cooling ever since. Or like an earthquake, followed by aftershocks. I was in San Francisco in 76 and 77 during the punk explosion, and that was very exciting, but there was no sense this was going to kickstart a new round of change. We hoped so, but didn't think so.

But I think we're coming to a big one, something much bigger than the 60s. Not only because we have to, if we are to survive, but also because back then we had a tremendously high level of illusion. Much of our idealism was misplaced, and we believed it wouldn't take that much to effect significant change. We had a certainly unwarranted faith in institutions, and we didn't think things through far enough. We weren't grounded enough, tied tightly enough to reality. Now if that revolutionary energy comes back it's going to be far more total.

**DJ:** I used to teach at Eastern Washington University, and I would ask my students if we live in a democracy. They wouldn't bother to answer, but would just laugh. I would ask if the government cares more for the rights of corporations or individuals. Same response. That filled me with hope.

**JZ:** I first really saw that when I moved back to Oregon from California in 1981. It was the day Reagan was shot. It was a total contrast to the killing of Kennedy. In 1963 people cried and mourned. It was a trauma. But in 1981 that wasn't the case. I had delivered a car to Eugene, and then had to take a bus to my parents' home. As I walked into the bus station, there were a bunch of people huddled around this

little portable tv set. It was coverage of the assassination attempt. They didn't know yet if Reagan was dead. There had been some sort of event, and the people waiting for the bus were primarily students from Oregon State, which is, as I suspect is the case for Eastern Washington, a conservative school. Anyway, everyone was laughing and chuckling and carrying on. They were scathing. I just listened the whole way, and really noticed the total lack of faith in the government. So this time when things blow, they're going to blow for real.

**DJ:** In *Elements of Refusal* you go into great detail about how in the early part of this century, there was a tremendous amount of revolutionary energy in the air, and that in many ways World War I was an explicit attempt to destroy that energy through the carnage of state-sponsored violence.

**JZ:** War, of course, always requires a good excuse, especially when the state's real enemies are, more clearly than usual, its own citizenry. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand well-suited the needs of a dying regime. But by no means did it cause the war. First, the assassination was not atypical. Many European heads of state or upper level administrators were killed in the years just previous. Next, the immediate reaction all through Europe to the news of the assassination was indifference. The people took little notice, and the stock market didn't really respond at all.

We've also been told that the war came because an intricate series of treaties guaranteed that any localized conflict would quickly spread. That's nonsense. After the assassination Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to Serbia. But Serbia capitulated! There was no reason for war! Nonetheless, Austria-Hungary needed a war, and a big one, so war was declared anyway. And why would Russia defend an-already-capitulated Serbia? Because it, too, needed a war to stave off its own imminent collapse.

The real reason for the war, I believe, had to do with the tremendous unrest in all of Europe. 1913 and 1914 had seen immense strikes all across Russia. Austria-Hungary was on the verge of civil war. Revolutionary movements and radical unions were on the ascent in the United States, Germany, France, Italy, England. Even George V acknowledged this when he said in the summer of 1914, just before the war, "The cry of civil war is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people." Things had to explode.

But how would things explode, and at whom would this explosion be directed? What better way to destroy hope than through a long and pointless war? And it worked. Most unions and left-wing parties backed the war, and those that didn't—like the Wobblies here in the US—the state simply destroyed. After the war not many people had the heart anymore to pursue revolution, and those who did, like Mussolini or the Bolsheviks, were not true revolutionaries in terms of overturning the social order, but instead opportunists who turned the power vacuums to their own advantage.

**DJ:** Does that parallel make you think there will be another big war?

**JZ:** Sure, but this one can only last 24 hours, because people won't support it any longer than that...

**DJ:** Where do you think all this energy—it seems odd to call alienation energy—is going to go?

**JZ:** Is it piling up? I don't know. I definitely know we aren't the happy mindless consumers we're supposed to be. Or even if we believe we are, our bodies know better. I recently wrote a short review of the new book by Ellen Showalter, called *Hysterias*. In this she talks about what she calls six different hysterias of the nineties: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Gulf War Syndrome, recovered memory, satanic cults, and so on. Some people are very offended because it sounds like she's saying it's all in your head.

**DJ:** Even her choice of title is very revealing in that manner. Freud chose the term hysteria to describe his patients' descriptions of childhood sexual abuse at the hands and genitals of their fathers. At first he believed these accounts, and began to uncover a tremendous epidemic of incest, an epidemic that continues unabated to this day. But when he began to go public with these findings, they were so ill-received that he found himself quickly backing away, and created an entire philosophy around his denial of this evidence. To allow himself to disbelieve these accounts, he called the women hysterical.

**JZ:** I hear what you're saying, and that's a very good point. Where I'm taking this, however, is in a slightly different direction. It seems to me, and I have to say the book is very undeveloped, that the point of her book is that we are all so miserable, and so deeply in denial, that these crises will keep arising, whether or not they have physical geneses: once each "hysteria" passes by, another will arise. And you'll never find any cures. You might say that in the case of Gulf War Syndrome this takes the government off the hook by suggesting the government didn't poison or irradiate American troops. But it seems to me more radical to say that not only may the government have poisoned Americans—which it's done so many times as to almost be banal—but that no matter what you are doing or where you live, life now is so crippling, alienated, bizarre, and fucked as to spawn all these potentially psychogenic problems. Of course we all know that's the case, with little kids mowing each other down in school—four cases of it in four months—and all sorts of other outrages unimaginable even ten years ago. And now they're commonplace. Expected even. What the hell does that say about our way of living? No longer can anyone get away with particularizing any of these problems. It's all just so fundamentally rotten and pathological that it indicts the whole system.

Sure the government is capable of and willing to poison its own citizens. Happens all the time. But it's even worse...

**DJ:** No matter how you look at it, it's damning. If the government didn't poison the soldiers in this case, what's the psychogenic cause of the syndrome? And if it did, which I believe is the case, what the hell does that mean? What does it mean that our own "elected" government would poison us?

This leads to a difficulty I have with this whole discussion. It's something I've not yet answered in my own work. Not only do we have to remember or relearn how to live sustainably, but we have to figure out how to deal with those forces that right now are destroying all those who do live sustainably. It's all very good for us to talk about

living sanely and without domination, but we all know what would happen if we in our communities developed sustainable ways to live, and members of the dominant culture wanted our resources. We and our community would be destroyed, and our resources would be stolen.

**JZ:** That's just a reality. We'd like to think that violence isn't necessary in response, but I'm not sure if that's the case.

Now, you can say that if upheavals are large enough, actually there isn't very much violence.

**DJ:** Tell me more.

**JZ:** The first example that comes to mind is the May 1968 uprising in France, in which ten million people, in a wildcat strike, just began to occupy their workplaces. Astronomers, factory workers, you name it. Students provided the trigger, but after that all these grievances came out in a rush. The police and the army were completely useless to the state, because the whole country was involved. For a time they considered sending in NATO. Unfortunately, the uprising didn't last very long before it was brought under control, mainly by the leftists and unions who wanted to coopt the revolutionary energy for their reformist demands. But for a time the people really had control of the entire country. And it was totally nonviolent. Violence wasn't necessary.

**DJ:** But the uprising created no long-term change, did it?

**JZ:** No. But it did expose how really fragile are the powers of coercion that the state has. In that kind of mass uprising the state is helpless.

We saw that again in the collapse of state capitalism in the USSR and the East Block. There was not much violence. It just all fell apart. I'm not saying that's going to happen, nor am I saying that collapse led to any sort of radical shift, but it does point out there have been bloodless upheavals in history.

**DJ:** Maybe one of the things that can help us through this is the natural world. The system is already beginning to collapse, and I think one of the things we can do is try to make sure that grizzly bear and salmon stay alive through the crash. Another thing we can do is attempt to articulate these alternatives.

**JZ:** Which is what I believe we are trying to do here.

**DJ:** I want to come back to the question of what one does with the knowledge that those in power have tanks and guns and airplanes. This seems to me one of the fundamental questions of our time, if not the fundamental question. How does one respond sanely and effectively to outrageously destructive behavior? How does a fundamentally peaceful person respond to violence? How do you make peace with the fact that in order to end coercion, you may have to coerce? You may have to coerce the coercers.

**JZ:** That is a tough one. You read the journals of Columbus—and there are hundreds of examples of this type of thing—where the peaceful indigenous people greeted the invaders with open arms. The smart thing to have done, I suppose, would have been to cut the throats of the invaders. I don't think many people would argue with that, or if they would, they have probably not been the subject of violence in their own



person, their own family, their own community. But the question arises, among these peaceful people, where would the imperative to cut the invaders' throats have come from? Not only the knowledge of what was going to happen to them, but also the moral knowledge to commit that violence. It was not their way.

**DJ:** Sherman Alexie tells this great story about how he wishes he would have been alive when Columbus landed. He proceeds through all manner of violence he would have done to Columbus and his troops, then stops and says, "No, we couldn't have done that. That is not who we are."

**JZ:** Maybe you just have to say that the second time around it isn't going to be that way. We didn't make this culture. We didn't turn the world into the battleground and cemetery it has become. We didn't turn human relations into the parody they have become. But now it is our responsibility to overcome what our culture has created. Maybe you could say that now we must be what we must be to overcome it. Adorno talks about that, about overcoming alienation with alienation. How does that work? I don't know, but I think about it. Anybody who cares about the continuation of life on the planet really has to, at this point. To take it to the most personal level, could you kill somebody, if you knew that to do so would save other lives?

**DJ:** Lately I've been reading a lot about German resistance to Hitler, and I have been struck by the fact that despite knowing Hitler had to be removed before a "decent" government could be installed, they spent more time creating paper versions of this theoretical government than attempting to remove him from power. It wasn't a lack of courage that caused this blindness but rather a misguided sense of morals. Karl Goerdeler, for instance, though tireless in attempting to create this new government, staunchly opposed assassinating Hitler, believing that if only the two could sit face to face Hitler might relent. How do you wrap your mind around that, and how do you personalize it, as you said?

**JZ:** This ties back to the Showalter book. Maybe these "hysterias," if that is what they are, are the result of our turning anger inward instead of turning it against the system.

We also know what happens to those who turn violent against the system, even if their violence is justified. The ones I know are either dead or in prison. I have a friend in prison who was once a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. I once asked what made him cross the line into violence, and he said, "I just had to do it. It was absolutely unavoidable."

**DJ:** I asked the Tupacamarista what caused him to cross that line, and he said it was seeing the futility of civil resistance, and also seeing friends and fellow nonviolent activists murdered by state police.

**JZ:** I've thought a lot about how I can best serve—and I realize that at least part of this answer is based on class privilege, on a wider set of options being open to me than to many others—but for right now I'm OK with my form of resistance, which is through cultural critique. For me, words are a better weapon to bring down the system

than a gun would be. This is to say nothing of anybody else's choice of weapon, only my own. So that's why I do what I do. But my words are nothing but a weapon.

**DJ:** Obviously the same is true for me. But even having made that decision for now, I still revisit the question. Every morning when I awake, for example, I ask myself whether I should write or blow up a dam. I tell myself I should keep writing, though I'm not sure that's right, because it's neither a lack of words nor activism that's killing salmon here in the Northwest, but the presence of dams. Anyone who knows anything about salmon knows the dams must go. Anyone who knows anything about politics knows the dams will stay. Scientists study, politicians and business people lie and delay, bureaucrats hold sham public input meetings, activists write letters and press releases, I write books, and still the salmon die. It's a cozy relationship for all of us but the salmon.

Or to take another example, I recently read that Gandhi wrote a letter to Hitler appealing to his conscience, and was amazed that it didn't work.

**JZ:** Gandhi's failure doesn't mean words must always fail. He was obviously directing his words at the wrong place. Had he spoken more radical and effective words to his fellow Indians, things might be different there now.

**DJ:** Right! Or if he was going to get involved in Germany, he should have written not to Hitler, who was obviously a lost cause, but instead perhaps an open letter to members of the resistance, letting them know they were not alone.

**JZ:** Yes.

**DJ:** But the question of violence is even more complex than we've made it so far. I know also we kill by inaction as surely by action. I came to that understanding a year ago. I had a goose who was killing chickens, and because I don't like to kill I didn't kill him. Finally he killed one too many, and so I killed him and ate him for dinner. Here's the point: that evening I was noticing my existential depression at having ended a life, when a friend pointed out that I was responsible that day not just for one death, but for many more. I was responsible as well for the chickens I allowed him to kill because I myself was not willing to stop him.

**JZ:** I recently saw a quote by Exene Cervenkorá, the lead singer in the band X, in which she said, "I've killed way more people than Kaczynski, because I've been paying a lot of taxes in the last fifteen years, and he hasn't." I was really struck by what an effective point that is. It reminds us we're all implicated.

**DJ:** Let's go back to the notion of anti-authoritarianism. Can there be leaders without domination?

**JZ:** I think persuasion isn't domination, as long as it isn't manipulative, and as long as it's transparent. That's exactly how the Anarchist troops in the Spanish Civil War were led. Decisions were largely made by discussion, and once decisions were made then whomever was going to lead the troops decided how it was to be done. He was given authority on a case by case basis. This worked well for a time, but then as happens so often, so-called allies—in this case the communist party and the Soviet Union, along with other conservative pressures in Spain—weeded out the anti-authoritarianism. The

Anarchist units ended up becoming regular units in the army, and the passion for the revolution was sacrificed.

This whole question of leadership, by the way, is the reason I stopped being an organizer. For a time I was in this sort of do-it-yourself union in San Francisco. It was opposed to all of the corrupt bureaucratic Organized Labor unions, and it was very Anarchist, though we didn't use that term. Our general tactic was to help everybody with all of their issues, all of their grievances, defend everything, dispute everything. We were following a theory prevalent in the 60s called "The Long March Through the Institutions," which held that the only way to topple the system is from within. I no longer believe that, of course. But the thing that finally dawned on me was that I wasn't doing the work for the right reason. I wasn't specifically trying to help this person get her job back, or that person change this policy—although I did help with these situations—so much as I was using the work as an avenue to overturn the institutions. I didn't say, "I'm doing this because I want to destroy the system," nor did I say, "My perspective goes way beyond this union," because I didn't think a lot of people could relate to that. They just wanted their jobs back, or higher wages, or whatever. And they came to me because I could help with that. I eventually realized that this lack of transparency was manipulative. So I had to stop.

That's why now I depend more on critique, because I couldn't figure out how to not have a hidden agenda and still be an effective organizer. I don't run into that problem as a writer. No one is forced to read my stuff, and so we—the readers and I—enjoy a nonhierarchical relationship.

**DJ:** So persuasion isn't domination?

**JZ:** Not at all. Not so long as it's honest.

**DJ:** What do you want from your work and your life?

**JZ:** I would like to see a face to face community, an intimate existence, where relations are not based on power, and thus not on division of labor. I would like to see an intact natural world, and I would like to live as a fully human being. I would like that for the people around me.

**DJ:** Once again, how do we get there from here?

**JZ:** I have no idea. It might be something as simple as everybody just staying home from work. Fuck it. Withdraw your energy. The system can't last without us. It needs to suck our energy. If people stop responding to the system, it's doomed.

**DJ:** But if we stop responding, if we really decide not to go along, aren't we doomed also, because the system will destroy us?

**JZ:** Right. It's not so easy. If it were that simple, people would just stay home, because it's such a drag to go through these miserable routines in an increasingly empty culture. But a question we always have to keep in mind is this: we're doomed, but in which way are we more doomed? I recently gave a talk at the University of Oregon in which I spoke on a lot of these topics. Near the end I said, "I know that a call for this sort of overturning of the system sounds ridiculous, but the only thing I can think of that's even more ridiculous is to just let the system keep on going."

**DJ:** How do we know that all the alienation we see around us will lead to breakdown and rejuvenation? Why can't it just lead to more alienation? I know I've spent the last twenty years working as hard as I can to understand all this and extricate myself as much as I can from it. But I've no family to support. I've no wage job. Alienation can lead to understanding, but it can also lead to just passing on the damage to those around us.

**JZ:** It's a question of how reversible the damage is. Sometimes—and I don't believe this is too much avoidance or denial—sometimes in history things are reversed in a moment when the physical world intrudes enough to knock us off balance. Vaneigim refers to a lovely little thing that gives me tremendous hope. The dogs in Pavlov's laboratory had been conditioned for hundreds of hours. They were fully trained and domesticated. Then there was a flood in the basement. And you know what happened? They forgot all of their training in the blink of an eye. We should be able to do at least that well. I am staking my life on it, and it is toward this end that I devote my work.

*Originally published in the September 1998 issue of The Sun.*

*Republished in Spring 1999 in Santa Monica Review.*

*Included in March 2002 in Zerzan's book Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization.*

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Enemy of the State: An Interview with John Zerzan  
September 1, 1998

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