

John Zerzan Is Running on Emptiness

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Twilight of the Machines, by John Zerzan, Feral House, 2008.

John Zerzan's newest collection of essays is a disappointing one. Unlike his previous books — which balance a primitivist critique of civilization with topics as diverse as labor history and classical music — *Twilight of the Machines* almost completely rejects this fascinating variety for a series of redundant, muddled and ultimately boring essays on a limited selection of topics. A hit-or-completely-miss collection, the book does contain a few thought-provoking essays that are certain to become classics.

Twilight is divided into two parts. "Part I: Origins of the Crisis" includes essays on the oppressive nature of symbolism and language, the emergence of warfare, the alienation of urban life and the impressive capabilities of our primitive ancestors. These are all topics that Zerzan has discussed at length in his previous books, and he offers few new insights here.

One exception is "Patriarchy, Civilization and the Origins of Gender," which does an excellent job of merging ecofeminism and radical gender theory with a primitivist analysis. As far as I know, this essay represents Zerzan's most substantial discussion of patriarchal domination and gender equality. It's a powerful antidote to the stereotype of hunting males and child-rearing females. Anyone interested in rewilding should pay close attention.

In "The Iron Grip of Civilization: The Axial Age," Zerzan explores the emergence of new worldviews during the first millennium BCE. This is the longest piece in the book, as well as one of the most engaging and original. Unfortunately, the essay also seems shallowly researched and poorly conceived, and its implications are troubling.

Zerzan argues that the religions that emerged during the Axial Age — including Judaism and Buddhism — represent a severe departure from the authentic and unmediated primitive spiritualities that preceded them. According to Zerzan, these religions traded direct experience of the natural world for false promises of transcendence (e.g., heaven and nirvana) designed to maintain hierarchy, enslave nature and exert oppressive social control. Zerzan concludes by encouraging readers to reclaim their "authentic spirituality," although he does not suggest any ways to actually do this. Are Jews and Buddhists supposed to abandon their ancient traditions in order to emulate surviving "primitive" peoples or white, secular anarchists? This strategy seems decidedly inauthentic, if not subtly racist.

The essay relies almost exclusively on sources (many of them decades old) that confirm Zerzan's narrow and cynical assessment. If he'd done more research, Zerzan might have discovered that the religious traditions he summarily rejects include numerous anti-authoritarian, utopian and nature-venerating strains. Moreover, Judaism and Buddhism (not to mention Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) have preserved many beliefs and practices of the indigenous, Earth-based spiritualities that preceded them. Thus, each tradition offers its adherents means of discovering and reclaiming the ways in which their ancestors honored the Earth as sacred. It's a shame that Zerzan refuses to see this.

“Part II: The Crisis of Civilization” is even more redundant and tiresome than Part I. Most of the essays in this part simply repeat the same critique of postmodernism, which Zerzan plainly despises. Moreover, a few essays on unrelated topics quickly devolve into denunciations of postmodern thinkers. This obsessive animosity to postmodernism is particularly confusing since so much of Zerzan’s own work draws heavily from postmodern critiques of contemporary civilization and is written in the style of postmodern critical theory.

The worst piece in the book is “Overman and Unabomber,” a meandering, pointless comparison of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ted Kaczynski that reads more like a grade-school compare/contrast paper than a philosophical essay. Possessing neither a substantial introduction nor any discernable conclusion, it goes nowhere and says nothing.

Fortunately, there are a couple of dazzling gems. “Twilight of the Machines” and “Why Primitivism?” rank among Zerzan’s most succinct and effective arguments for primitivism, combining vivid and distressing catalogues of civilization’s rapid degeneration, uncompromising assessments of the insufficiency of the mainstream left (including labor anarchism) and inspiring descriptions of the wild alternative. “Twilight of the Machines,” in particular, contains an astute and intriguing reflection on the spread of anarcho-primitivism in the wake of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests — a particularly interesting discussion given Zerzan’s role (real or perceived) in building that very movement.

Overall, *Twilight of the Machines* is a frustrating collection. Some of the essays should be considered required reading for all green anarchists, some will be enjoyed only by diehard Zerzan fans, and some are frankly embarrassing. Wait until the good ones are reprinted as zines. You’ll be happy you did.

Josh recently left the Journal’s editorial collective after more than three years to gallantly learn some stuff at some non-primitive institution. So, we’re going to get him back by changing his biography sentence. We’ll miss Josh, his fecophilic humor and his amazing editing skills. We hope that he only reads books he actually likes from now on.

The Ted K Archive

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