

The Anarcho-Primitivist Who Wants Us All to Give Up Technology

John Zerzan's moral argument for going back to nature

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27.6.14

“Whenever I think of [inventor of the computer] Alan Turing, I think about the Apple logo,” began John Zerzan. “The logo is an apple with a bite out of it. Of course, Turing supposedly smeared cyanide on an apple and bit into it after being persecuted by the government for being gay. A bite from an apple is also associated with our expulsion from the Garden of Eden. I don’t think that’s quite the message they’re trying to convey, but there it is.”

I had arranged an interview with arguably the world’s most prominent anti-technology philosopher via email. The interview was to be conducted via Skype. At the appointed time, Zerzan’s voice leapt across the continent – from Eugene, Oregon to New York City in the fraction of a second. He was smiling when his face flashed onto the monitor. I smiled back and looked into his eyes – before catching myself. The irony of Skype, of course, is that in order to actually make eye contact with someone, you have to ignore their eyes and look into the camera instead.

VICE: You advocate for all of civilisation to abandon technology and return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. How do you feel about the Skype call that we’re having right now?

John Zerzan: I was on the Art Bell show years ago and he kept saying that to be consistent with my philosophy, I should live in a cave. I said, “Yeah, you’re right, but then this conversation wouldn’t be possible.” You have to try to connect with people. You have to be part of the conversation in society or else you’re not serious.

So, is that the only reason that you don’t go live in the wilderness?

Well, I guess so, although I would have to say that, like most people, I’m pretty damned domesticated. I enjoy when I’m out there, but I’m not as equipped as some people.

Have you had periods where you have lived off the grid?

Not really, though I’ve gone to the mountains for a few days at a time.

And when you went there, did you get a sense of what your life in the city is missing?

Sure, you unplug and connect with nature. It’s one thing to write about it, but you need to be out there in it too. We’re not going to have a transition [to a hunter-gatherer existence] until we learn how to do without technology and civilisation. There are practical things that need to be tackled.

How do you think you would fare during the transition with your skill set?

You know, I’m 70. I lift weights, but as far as actually having primitive skills I’m pretty deficient. If [civilisation] crashed overnight we’d all be in trouble. We’re so dependent on technology for everything – even the simplest things.

Though that dependence and interconnectivity would seem to make a collapse more likely, right? There would be a domino effect.

I think so. They say that if one satellite fails then they’ll all start falling. But that doesn’t mean that people wouldn’t go ahead and try and put everything right back up again.

How can you convince people to give up technology?

It won't happen unless people get tired of more and more mediation. If you're going to be content to be a zombie staring at your little screen, of course nothing will happen. I'm hopeful that people are going to find that pretty dull.

When did you have your epiphany about all of this?

I didn't have one epiphany. I began to see that there is an intentionality to technology. It isn't just some neutral thing. The Industrial Revolution wasn't just about economics. As Foucault says, it was more about imposing discipline. It started to dawn on me, maybe technology has always been that way. People are not yet thinking too much about it, but Hollywood is thinking about it. Look at *Her*. Look at *Transcendence*. These are amazing movies that just put it right on the table. You want more technology? You want to be absolutely dehumanised and humiliated? This is what it looks like.

Is there any way that technological advancement might turn out OK?

No. I don't think so. The trans-humanists say that if we just have more technology, we'll have a quantum leap and everything will be OK. We will solve all the problems. We will live forever. Well, how is that working out so far? We're seeing the collapse of the global environment. We have these mass shootings. "We're all connected," they say, but we've never been more disconnected from each other in history.

So you want to be connected, and the trans-humanists want to be connected. Is it possible that you're both striving for the same idea of utopia?

Maybe, but what these guys are really saying is that the brain is a computer. Well, the brain is not a computer. It's nothing like a computer. That's just basically stupid. It's not a machine. We're not machines. They have no idea what consciousness is. Nobody does.

I think they make that claim because they see the brain as being an entirely physical entity, just like a computer. Do you believe that there is a non-physical or a spiritual component that's impossible to replicate?

So far, all they've managed to do is make a machine that can beat a human at chess. That's just faster calculation. How is that intelligence? And, furthermore, how is that consciousness? I remember being in Turkey giving a talk and this young woman said, "You know, I think this green anarchy movement is at base a spiritual movement." Wow. Maybe we've been groping towards that all along.

There's definitely idealisation on the part of many trans-humanists, though [Unabomber] Theodore Kaczynski writes in his essay "The Truth About Primitive Life" that there is a lot of idealisation of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, too. Do you have a response to that?

Well, one thing Ted got right is that it does no good to create an idealised and romantic version of prehistory. But I'll tell you one other thing, and it's the reason why we're not on terms any more: He was fiddling with the sources, and that is not forgivable in my opinion. He deliberately took things out of context in a way that is dishonest, to put it mildly.

Can you give an example?

He wrote that gays were routinely suppressed by all these different primitive societies. He quoted the source he was using to say that gay sex was forbidden, but if you look at the whole quote, actually all sex was forbidden during a certain ritual that lasted a few days. In other words, that was a lie.

What was his motivation, do you think, for the misrepresentation?

Well, he's got a very narrow focus. If it's not anti-technology, it's fucked up. But, I think the question is deeper. It's about civilisation. It's about domestication. We lived for 2,000,000 years without civilisation and people got along very well.

And, according to your essays, you believe that one of the reasons they got along so well is because they didn't have language, right? Are you advocating an abandonment of language as well?

I have to say this is the most speculative thing that I've written about. I'm not abandoning the argument, and I try to make a case for questioning symbolic activity, even including language, but it's much more clear in terms of time, and numbers, and art. What makes it so speculative is that no one knows when speech started. There's no way to prove it.

You've written that language fractures a holistic world into isolated fragments. Do you have a sense for what life without speech would be like?

I think it would be just a more direct form of communication. I found it stunning that Freud, the arch-rationalist, said that he thought that humans were telepathic originally. He didn't think that was such a marvelous thing. I would say that sounds pretty great. You don't even have to have symbolic mediation, you can just communicate without symbols.

The idea of universal telepathy almost sounds like the trans-humanist concept of the singularity. Everything would be directly transferred between participants without symbolism.

Yeah, I guess you could call it that – the original singularity.

Do you think we can ever give up speech?

Who knows. So many poets have said that the deepest most intense stuff is never put into words.

You talked about time becoming symbolic. Have you ever experienced time in a non-symbolic way?

In my own life I've always had this acute sense of time. I don't know why. I remember working in the fields picking strawberries as a kid. We would start working at 6AM and there was a steam whistle that blew at noon. Well, I could always tell within seconds when that whistle was going to blow. It was uncanny and I took great pride in it. Another way to look at it is that I was so colonised by time, so ruled by it. Time has become a material thing. I think you could even say that our sense of time-consciousness is pretty much the best way to measure alienation.

What do you think about the violent anti-technology groups that have arisen to take the place of Ted Kaczynski? There's the Mexican group Individuals Tending Towards the Savage, for example...

There is another one in Mexico called Obsidian Point. It's interesting that the obsidian point is sharper than surgical steel. It makes you think about the solutions that people had outside of the technological system.

And ITS?

The ITS group is real slavish to Ted Kaczynski. I think it's a little unfortunate. They even put out a slur or two on me. Why are they taking a little shot at Zerzan? It's because I caught Ted cheating and they know that. Violent groups like ITS have already killed two people. So yeah, they're for real.

Do you think their methods will prove successful?

I doubt it. One of the things that turns me off a lot is that the ITS group sends bombs just like Ted. When they injured some postal employee, they said, "Oh well, that's just the way it goes. This is war and there will be casualties – collateral damage."

How do you feel about anarcho-primitivist groups like ITS using technology to accomplish their aims? It reminds me of that old communist idea – that the state is necessary at first, and then it's supposed to become unnecessary and wither away. Of course, it never does wither away. It only gets stronger.

That's an interesting way to put it. Well, I just feel like we're trapped in these contradictions, period. If you want to call it hypocrisy, OK. I think about this a lot and I know there are people who feel that I have gone over to the dark side.

So, if civilisation does collapse, what do you think the re-wilding process will look like?

That's the number one question. How are we going to live? We're so de-skilled, how do we re-skill? Even something as far back as making stone tools, knowing what plants are edible. I mean, how anxious will you be to pull down civilisation if you don't know how to live without it? So, we have to start getting those skills.

And maybe it's not just learning long-forgotten skills, but also learning to forget. Will we forget what stars are, for example? In the past, people would look up and they wouldn't know what they were, and it wasn't so much an absence of knowledge, but a presence of mystery.

Right, why do people need to know those things? What's the instrumentality? I would contend that it's not ignorance. It's actually the opposite of ignorance. The hunter-gatherer people could see a bent blade of grass and tell you eight things about what it meant. Is that not science?

The lack of information also allows the individual to project themselves into that absence. There's a creativity to giving one's own personal meaning to things rather than having the meaning imposed from without.

That really hits the nail on the head. Here's a real quick little story. Some of us were gathering up in Olympia at an anarchist workshop and we overheard these people

say, “Man, these primitivists are crazier than we thought. One of them was saying that Earth is flat.” What [the primitivist had] really said was that if you live in band society of 60 people, it doesn’t matter if Earth is round or flat. We look at this marvelous photograph of Earth taken from the moon. Here we are on this fragile little globe, but what did it take to get that picture? What kind of massive industrialisation project did it take in order to have that one lovely picture?

The price was just too high?

Right. I have this friend in Detroit who always used to say, “You want to keep all of this nice technology? Great. So, do you want to go down in the mines and get the metal for it? Is there anybody who wants to be in a smelter?” I wouldn’t do it if somebody put a gun to my head. So, who’s going to do it? Are the trans-humanists going to do it? You have this wage slavery of millions of people who are risking their lives to make it possible for them to have their crazy trans-humanist fantasies.

How do you determine what technology is acceptable and what isn’t?

I think one very general way to look at it is division of labour. If you have a tool that anybody can make, that’s great. You’re in contact with it in a very sensual way. But tools that require a hierarchy of coordination and specialisation create a kind of distancing. That’s the kind of technology to avoid.

One thing I wonder about – and Stephen Hawking has brought this up – is that life on Earth will eventually be destroyed by either a meteorite or finally the sun burning out. He has suggested that our only hope of survival is to colonise outer space...

The sun will burn out in billions of years, but I don’t really think about billions of years very much myself. That’s just so infinitely remote. Things are so pressing right now, let’s work on that. Should we just jump on a rocket and leave the world behind as a smoking, toxic ruin? “We destroyed this planet, now on to the next.” What kind of answer is that?

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