

Anarchism as Primitivism

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If we are to question the idea of anarchism as a discourse of rational progress and dialectical development, should we then see it as an anti-civilisational politics opposed to the very notion of progress? This is precisely the position adopted by the anarcho-primitivist, John Zerzan, who engages in a radical critique of civilisation in the name of a pre-civilisational Golden Age: that is, an image of man in Palaeolithic times as naturally free and unencumbered by the constraints of modern society. Zerzan's argument here is seemingly the direct opposite of Bookchin's: while the latter affirms the idea of technological innovation and progress, locating the possibilities of human liberation in a future ecological society, the former has an utterly dystopian vision of modernity, harkening back instead to a prelapsarian time of total freedom and oneness with nature, a state which it was our misfortune to ever abandon. For Zerzan, the hope of human liberation lies in a total destruction of technology and the trappings of civilisation, and a return to a primitive existence: an insurrection of the future primitive.¹ Moreover, it is because of his anti-civilisational stance, and his dystopian rejection of technology and the idea of progress, that Zerzan is condemned as a nihilistic 'lifestyle' anarchist in Bookchin's aforementioned polemic. Yet, these two thinkers have more in common than it may appear: they both hang on to the Enlightenment desire for *social fullness*. That is, the idea of a rational social harmony and the overcoming of alienation. Bookchin seeks this social fullness in the future, while Zerzan finds it in the past.

This similarity becomes more evident in their mutual opposition to postmodernism/poststructuralism. Like Bookchin, Zerzan equates postmodernism with nihilism, irrationalism and relativism. He refers to it as a 'catastrophe', arguing that it simply mirrors the abstraction, fragmentation and loss of reality generated by contemporary hyper-capitalism and consumerism. However, aside from the problematic conflation of a certain pop-culture notion of postmodernism — which I would agree largely consists in a fetishisation of capitalism and is incapable of providing any effective critique of it — with poststructuralism, which I see as more politically engaged, it is curious that Zerzan condemns postmodernism for its assault on Enlightenment humanism: 'Postmodernism subverts two of the over-arching tenets of Enlightenment humanism: the power of language to shape the world and the power of consciousness to shape a self.'² Yet surely the discourse of Enlightenment humanism, with its ideas of the rationally conscious individual and human emancipation, are products of the very civilisation that Zerzan so violently rejects. Indeed, in another essay, Zerzan claims that language itself is alienating and repressive because it abstracts us from the more immediate and authentic relationship with the world;³ and yet he condemns postmodernism for undermining the power of language to shape the world. In what sense would rationality, and

¹ See John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

² See Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 108.

³ See Zerzan, 'Language: Origin and Meaning', *Elements of Refusal* (Columbia, MO: CAL Press, 1999).

Enlightenment humanist notions of the autonomous subject, have any sort of meaning at all in the primitive, pre-linguistic societies Zerzan admires?

Such moments of self-contradiction aside, what becomes apparent in Zerzan's critique of postmodernism is the desire to preserve some notion of authenticity and presence; the idea that there is an essential reality — the thing in itself — beyond discourse and representation. What postmodernism undermines and disrupts, according to Zerzan, is the possibility of an authentic relationship with the world, a sensory appreciation of the real which is unmediated by language. The effect of strategies like deconstruction, according to Zerzan, is to make impossible 'unmediated contact or communication, only signs and representations; deconstruction is a search for presence and fulfilment interminably, necessarily, deferred'.⁴ This is why Zerzan is also critical of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as it shows that pre-symbolic *jouissance* is impossible and unattainable because it is outside the order of language and representation.

Zerzan's desire to return to some authentic relationship with the world, some unmediated experience of the present, is like the desire to return to the pre-Oedipal state of bliss: the unmediated, harmonious enjoyment (*jouissance*) with the mother prior to the alienating intervention of the paternal signifier. Indeed, his descriptions of primitive hunter-gatherer societies in Palaeolithic times, for whom the constraints of civilisation, the burdens of gender and economic hierarchies and the violence and alienations of capitalism, technology and the division of labour were unknown, were societies of bliss, innocence and harmony, in which one experienced an authentic and immediate relationship with the natural environment. To live such an undomesticated existence, without technology, without involuntary work, without family structures, without even language and symbolic representation, is to experience a genuine freedom and a complete oneness with the world. According to Zerzan, such primitive hunter-gatherer societies were societies of leisure, abundance and egalitarianism.

This idea of a lost state of innocent enjoyment and authenticity has a powerful resonance today in the face of the pervasive intrusions and constraints of our technologically-saturated societies. Here we should not dismiss of the value of Zerzan's dystopian critique. We do, indeed, live a domesticated existence in our time of biopolitical capitalism, with its continual deployment of technologies of surveillance and control, its cynical commodification and manipulation of biological life itself and its devastation of the natural environment. Societies in the developed world increasingly resemble giant, hi-tech prisons, with their surveillance cameras, databases, biometric technologies and their enclosure of the commons. Are we not all haunted by the desire to destroy the chains that bind us, to escape these confines, to roam freely in wildness of a state of nature? Does not the desire to escape domestication recur as a powerful social fantasy? Indeed, this is how we should approach Zerzan's vision of authentic primitive societies. They should not be seen as actually existing societies; despite the abundance of anthropological studies that Zerzan cites as evidence for their

⁴ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 117.

existence, this is all pure speculation. Rather they should be seen as a kind of utopia, an antipolitical imaginary of freedom and autonomy that serves as a powerful basis for the critique of contemporary conditions. As Zerzan says, referring to the myth of the Golden Age, ‘Eden, or whatever name it goes by, was the home of our primeval forager ancestors, and expresses the yearning of disillusioned tillers of the soil for a lost life of freedom and relative ease.’⁵ We should, therefore, see Zerzan’s utopia of primitive freedom and authenticity not as something that once existed, still less as something we can return to as part of an anti-civilisational programme, but as a kind of negative imaginary, a point of exteriority and excess that allows us to escape from the mental confines of this world and to reflect on its limits. As Zerzan himself says: ‘To “define” a disalienated world would be impossible and even undesirable, but I think we can and should try to reveal the unworld of today and how it got this way.’⁶ We cannot return to a primitive hunter-gatherer existence. As Rousseau said, we cannot return to the primeval bliss of the state of nature — once we had abandoned this Golden Age there was no going back. We can only go forward, working with what we have, resisting and destroying certain technologies, utilising and civilising others, but, more importantly, creating new spaces for autonomy and equality, new ways of life that resist and escape domestication.

However, where Zerzan’s argument becomes problematic is in the essentialist notion that there is a rationally intelligible presence, a social objectivity that is beyond language and discourse. To speak in Lacanian terms, the pre-linguistic state of *jouissance* is precisely unattainable: it is always mediated by language that at the same time alienates and distorts it. It is an *imaginary* *jouissance*, an illusion created by the symbolic order itself, as the secret behind its veil. We live in a symbolic and linguistic universe, and to speculate about an original condition of authenticity and immediacy, or to imagine that an authentic presence is attainable behind the veils of the symbolic order or beyond the grasp of language, is futile. There is no getting outside language and the symbolic; nor can there be any return to the pre-Oedipal real. To speak in terms of alienation, as Zerzan does, is to image a pure presence or fullness beyond alienation, which is an impossibility. While Zerzan’s attack on technology and domestication is no doubt important and valid, it is based on a highly problematic essentialism implicit in his notion of alienation.

To question this discourse of alienation is not a conservative gesture. It does not rob us of normative reasons for resisting domination, as Zerzan claims. It is to suggest that projects of resistance and emancipation do not need to be grounded in an immediate presence or positive fullness that exists beyond power and discourse. Rather, radical politics can be seen as being based on a moment of negativity: an emptiness or lack that is productive of new modes of political subjectivity and action.⁷ Instead

⁵ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 29.

⁶ Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, p. 45.

⁷ A similar point is made by John Holloway, who sees negativity as the basis for a refusal of capitalism. While he retains the concept of alienation as characteristic of capitalism, he sees it as an

of hearkening back to a primordial authenticity that has been alienated and yet which can be recaptured — a state of harmony which would be the very eclipse of politics — I believe it is more fruitful to think in terms of a constitutive rift that is at the base of any identity, a rift that produces radical openings for political articulation and action.

operation which denies, not the original essence of the subject, but rather the subject's potentiality — a humanity to come, not a humanity to be recovered: 'Not a lost humanity, nor an existing humanity, but a humanity to be created.' See *Change the World Without Taking Power: the Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto, 2002), p. 152.

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