Don't We Live in a Utopia

John Zerzan's recently released memoir gives insight into an anarchist against civilization

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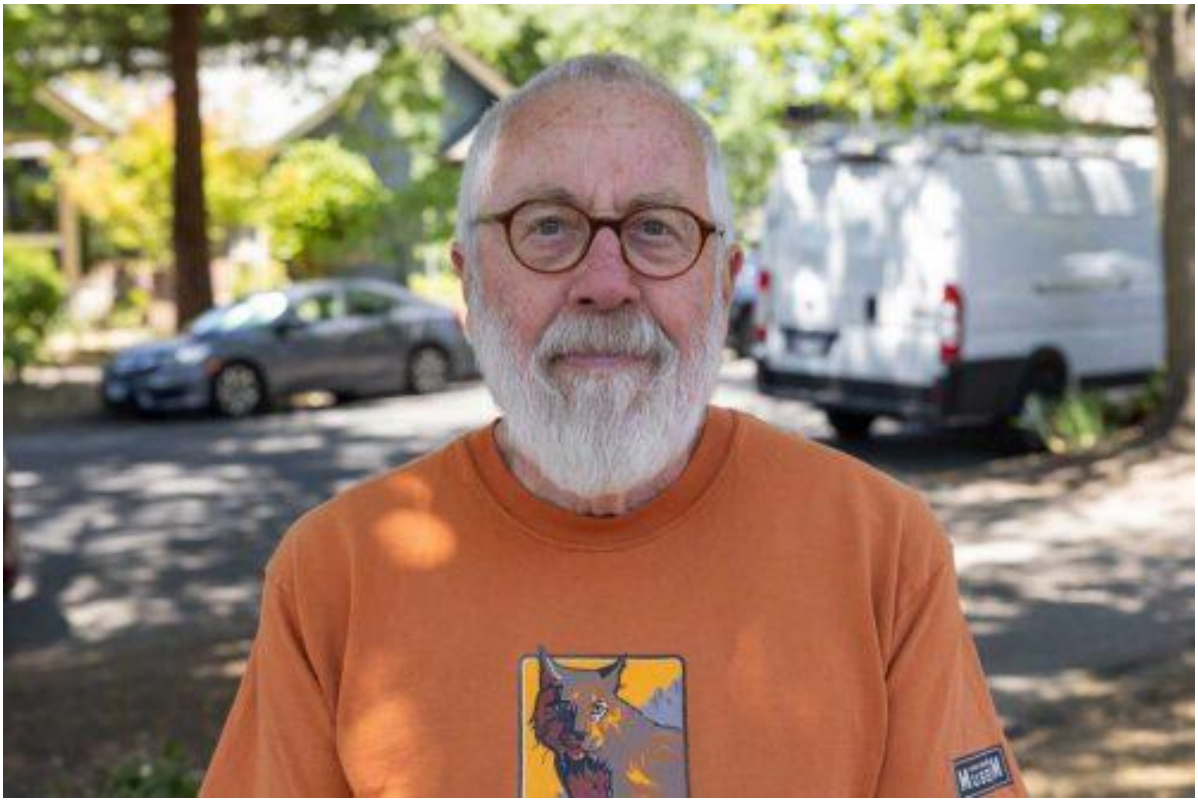

John Zerzan. Photo by Eve Weston.

In his recently published memoir, *Often in the Right Place: The Education of an Anarchist*, Eugene's own anarcho-primitivist philosopher details an exchange that took place between a leftist and his anarchist friends at a talk he gave in Izmir, Turkey, in 2004. The talk was in a small university hall, Zerzan writes, and it was buzzing with people. The leftist, a famous sculptor, according to Zerzan, asked: "Why would people want a primitivist life, that sounds like it would only be about survival?"

Zerzan's friends responded to delighted applause: "Why would people want a life that consists of working and watching TV?"

For those unfamiliar with Zerzan and anarcho-primitivism, these questions are at the very center of his philosophy. They are the million-dollar ones, if you will.

John Zerzan is Eugene's anarcho-primitivist philosopher, who has made a name for himself taking his anti-technology, anti-civilization philosophy around the world. He has published numerous books and essays, and hosts a weekly radio show, Anarchy Radio, on KWVA 88.1 FM.

Sitting in *Eugene Weekly*'s office, Zerzan doesn't look like the stereotype of an anarchist. He's older, born August 10, 1943, and wearing glasses, a T-shirt and a worn brown leather bomber. He can sit and talk about his life up to a point, always veering

toward philosophy, and once he gets into it he leans forward with a slight smile, his eyes coming alive.

The book itself is not as interested in explaining his ideology as it is showing how one might come to this ideas in the first place. "Bob Black once described me as basically a religious thinker, searching for the original sin," Zerzan writes in his memoir. "There's some truth to that, maybe in large part regarding the 'Origins' essays I wrote in the 1980s."

With his memoir, like his philosophy, he is interested in finding the root of his ideas — the original sin.

Mainly, though, Zerzan says he wrote it at the request of his wife. "I guess she knows I've witnessed some interesting stuff over the years," he says.

Zerzan went to Stanford University in the early 1960s, at the beginning of the counterculture movement, then he lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood in the mid '60s, at the center of the hippie movement. Then he participated in the Vietnam protests. And, in the late '60s, he worked as a social worker and participated in the labor movement.

"I wasn't looking for anything specific. The main thing for me was trying to do something about domination, and then the question became enlarging the target of domination," Zerzan says. He was always anti-authoritarian leaning, but was introduced to Marx at Stanford.

In Haight-Ashbury, he was, he says in his book, a "psychedelic Marxist" who walked around cold, foggy San Francisco days in an orange poncho, but he eventually found hippies too passive.

He joined these movements looking to fight domination, and each in turn, he says, were too liberal and not militant enough, and so he turned to anarchism.

In the fall of 1981, his eyes opened a little wider. He had just moved back to his home state from California, and was in the University of Oregon library researching a question that philosopher Herbert Marcuse posed: "Is there a possibility of redeeming the past?"

In his research he found the philosophy of Mircea Eliade, who introduced him to the concept of "no-time," Eliade called it, this mystical, primordial time of creation where time itself didn't exist.

"He was saying we all kind of desired that time," Zerzan says. "But to me it implied, maybe that's the reality, maybe that's the way we were, in fact, in practice, not just as some sort of spiritual practice. He was one of the bridges to then looking at the actual record — what does anthropology have to say about this? So that's when I dove head first into that literature and that was a total turning point for me."

From here he researched hunter-gatherer primitive societies, those that lived like our ancestors did 100,000 years ago. Without civilization, without agriculture, without technology, without organized violence, without any system whatsoever, in band societies of 150–200 people. "That just sounds like utopia," Zerzan says. "I mean isn't that what we're all really looking for?"

According to Zerzan, primitive societies like these have a higher quality of life because each member is truly free and independent and more connected to their immediate lives, thus less alienated and happier.

He outlines his critiques in his other essays. Essentially, agriculture laid the foundations of the concept of hierarchy, domination and division of labor so that an aristocratic upper class that did not have to do undesirable labor could form.

This lays the foundation for civilization, and the technology that came after was either used to subjugate free people to bring them into the embrace of civilization, or otherwise alienate civilized people from the freedom of primitivist life. And civilization will inevitably end at some point so it would be better to walk slowly, hand-in-hand into primitive oblivion than let some apocalypse thrust us there regardless.

This philosophy might sound familiar to those familiar with Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, whose primitivist manifesto, "Industrial Society and its Future," was published in major newspapers following his bombings that killed three people and injured 23 others between 1978 and 1995.

"When the whole Unabomber thing exploded in the media, there were anti-tech circles that, virtually all of them, just hid under their beds. They were terrified," Zerzan says. "And I thought 'This is a marvelous opportunity!'"

In 1995, *The New York Times* published "Prominent Anarchist Finds Unsought Ally in Serial Bomber,"which discussed Zerzan's views after the attacks.

"That's the sad part about the Unabomber," Zerzan says. "He was getting nowhere with just his analysis, but he was getting quite a bit somewhere when he started sending bombs in the mail. I don't advocate for sending bombs in the mail; never have. Maybe it's somebody's way to go, but it's certainly not mine."

When it comes to how exactly his ideology might be achieved, Zerzan himself readily admits that he isn't quite sure how it will look, he just knows that society cannot continue on its path. The path he envisions, some point out, would not be able to accommodate many of those who rely on technology and civilization to be able to live, namely disabled people.

Zerzan says that in hunter-gatherer societies, "There was a fairly obvious degree of infant mortality. And that's not a pleasant fact, but it's the story of history. We probably would have to do more evidentiary research to see if that's avoidable or not. I really don't know. It wasn't perfect, and there's no point in making a perfect fantasy out of it."

Regardless, because the future is so fuzzy, Zerzan says it would be hard to delineate what a functional future primitivist society would actually look like. "We talk about it as if it's in clear-cut terms, but I think often it's not super clear cut, which makes critiques more conceivably insidious," he says.

Zerzan admits he is not equipped to live in a primitivist society. "I'm practicing domestication in my backyard, growing vegetables," he says. "As an individual, I'll be pretty poorly equipped to become a hunter-gatherer. Not even my age, but I don't know how to do that stuff."

Despite this, Zerzan does not waver. Somehow, the future will still have to be primitive.

Often in the Right Place: The Education of an Anarchist *by John Zerzan was published by El Sur Es America, and can be found at Smith Family Bookstore, Tsunami Books and on Amazon.com for $16.84.*

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