

# **Anarchy in the USA**

**Four years after occupy wall street, meet the man who's been quietly fanning the flames of the country's most important insurrectionary movements.**

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At the end of April 1995, with just under a year left in the Unabomber's nearly two-decades-long campaign of antitechnology violence, the *New York Times* published excerpts from a letter by the still-unknown, unnamed Ted Kaczynski in which he promised to "permanently desist from terrorist activities" if the *Times* or another nationally read publication printed his manifesto. The letter, like all of Kaczynski's writing, was almost biblical in its moral pronouncements: technology is evil. The people who make technology are evil. Evil people deserve to die. People took from this only that the Unabomber was some kind of technophobe or Luddite or something—someone who hated modernity—and to get a more nuanced opinion, the *Times* sent a reporter to Eugene, Oregon, to interview a guy named John Zerzan.

Even then, Zerzan was probably the highest-profile anarchist in America. He was a fifty-two-year-old who earned his living as a babysitter. He lived in a housing co-op and didn't own a credit card (even after computers became mainstream, Zerzan did most of his writing by hand). In appearance and temperament, he looked and sounded like Tommy Chong: a bearded baritone you could picture singing "Up in Smoke" while driving around with a doobie the size of a hot dog. If it weren't for his two published collections of essays, *Elements of Refusal* and *Future Primitive*, Zerzan would have passed as another baby boomer with an aversion to adulthood. But in his writing, Zerzan espoused what is arguably the most extreme political philosophy on the planet: that the problem behind all the other problems—war, famine, disease, the environment—is civilization itself, and that the solution is to blow it up and start again.

It's doubtful that the Unabomber ever read Zerzan, but they'd both been influenced by some of the same people: Plato, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno. They had similar stories, too. Both were disgruntled academics of Eastern European origin who struggled to find their place in a country that had grown up too fast. Kaczynski killed people, and while Zerzan acknowledges that his vision would reduce the human population "fairly quickly," he doesn't actually advocate violence. In fact, Zerzan has been a lifelong pacifist. When the *Times* reporter asked him about all the attention that anti-industrial, antitechnology ideas were getting, he said it was "kind of unfortunate that it depends on spectacular violence by somebody, or whoever it is, to get it into print. That's not the best way to do it. But I really feel that we're getting to the point—and perhaps this is wishful thinking—that these ideas are about to burst on the scene."

When Kaczynski was finally discovered, arrested, and tried—after what was then the longest and most expensive manhunt in FBI history—the things he had written about burst onto the scene. Over the next twenty years, radical protest movements, from the Battle of Seattle to Occupy Wall Street, would blaze across the country. While the Unabomber is credited with bringing anarchy to the mainstream, it's Zerzan who has kept it there, writing manifestos that have influenced everyone from the "black bloc" anarchists who upset the polite protest agenda at the World Trade Organization protest in '99 to Micah White, co-instigator of Occupy Wall Street and one of *Esquire*

magazine's most influential people under thirty-five. In Eugene, often called the anarchist capital of the United States of America, Zerzan is a local legend. A couple of hours before our scheduled meeting, I had breakfast with NPR's Tom Manoff and his wife, Milagro Vargas. They knew of Zerzan because they are both involved in the classical music world—Manoff as a critic, Vargas as a singer—and among Zerzan's many peculiar distastes is classical music (he prefers the cat-on-the-keys sounds of Anton Webern). They told me, half-jokingly, to expect a police escort on my way from the restaurant to Zerzan's house. Two hours later, as I was arriving on the anarchist's doorstep, a cruiser drove by. Slowly.

Popular culture has defined *anarchy* as “the absence of rules”; it's actually the absence of *rule*—of authority. The prefix *an-* is Greek for “without,” while *arkos* means “chief” or “ruler.” (*The New Oxford American Dictionary* lists *anarchy* as a synonym for *nihilism*, a definition that probably only a socialist would give.) Anarchists are people who feel oppressed by other people, and by forms of dominion that restrict their desire to do, say, and think what they want. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud touched on anarchy's core mission when he said that our unhappiness is the product of a tension between our desire for freedom and society's essentially oppressive nature. We want to do things that we can't or shouldn't do if we want to avoid being arrested, ostracized, or otherwise punished. While often considered an extreme leftism, anarchy may have more in common with the political right, since its prized virtue—freedom—is precluded by the belief that oppression stems from political governance. (The anarchic *As* spray-painted on the sides of schools and police stations and courthouses are fairly precise indicators of anarchy's opponents.)

There are different kinds of anarchy, from anarcho-capitalism to anarcho-communism, “insurrectionary” anarchism to anarcho-pacifism. Wikipedia has a prefix fixation with anarchy, so much so that it seems there are more labels than there are people to identify with them. Even the entry for a high-profile anarchist like John Zerzan, who calls himself an “anarcho-primitivist,” seems somewhat disproportionate to his encyclopedic worth. Almost by definition, anarchists are marginal figures who attract a small but vocal cadre. The French social philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was the first to use the word *anarchy* in the modern sense, meaning a kind of stateless state. Attempts to establish anarchy in any meaningful way have been both dubious and short-lived. Anarchy was briefly tried in the Spanish Civil War—Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* describes it in detail—though it was heavily syndicated and looked suspiciously like communism. Anarchy's most successful moments arise out of extreme social, cultural, or political situations, when tensions pool around an issue for so long that a seemingly small event can trigger a global movement. A Tunisian fruit vendor is hassled by police and spurs the beginnings of the Arab Spring; the editor of a political magazine emails his monthly newsletter and instigates Occupy Wall Street.

The criticism most often leveled at anarchists is that their vision is akin to civil war. This is probably true, but it misses the broader point that anarchists view our placated peace as its own kind of violence. The first time I heard, or rather saw, John

Zerzan was in the documentary *Surplus: Terrorized into Being Consumers*, in which he suggests that the bandanna-wearing, Molotov cocktail-throwing anarchist is less of a threat to society than the average American youth. “The mindlessness is sitting there doing dope and watching MTV, and then you go and get a job and just schlep along—to me, that’s violent.” When I spoke to the psychotherapist and writer Gary Greenberg, who corresponded at length with an imprisoned Ted Kaczynski, he told me that the reason Kaczynski serial-bombed American technophiles was that he couldn’t do something the rest of us can do, “which is to live in a constant state of ironic alienation from the world in which we understand that we’re basically participating in and committing evil at every waking moment. We’re destroying the planet, we’re killing people in the third world, we’re sucking up all the resources of the earth...” The list goes on, yet somehow we manage to get up, go to work, and pretend like nothing’s wrong. “That is a magic trick. And Ted Kaczynski couldn’t pull it off. And anybody that can’t pull off that trick can’t live in this society.”

John Zerzan was one of those people. In 1975, at age thirty-two, he was an unemployed academic burnout who sold his blood for money and spent it on booze and tranquilizers. He’d split up with his girlfriend, and she’d taken their daughter and vanished. In San Francisco’s Mission District, where he was living, Zerzan committed petty crimes and destroyed private property. If his life had continued on that trajectory, it could have ended up like one of the stories he now talks about on his weekly radio broadcast from the University of Oregon: the Isla Vista man who went on a killing spree; the lone gunman who massacred twenty children at the Sandy Hook Elementary School (and called Zerzan’s show a year before the shooting). Zerzan interprets these seemingly random acts of violence as symptoms of “the pathology of civilization.” In his book *Running on Emptiness*, he quotes the suicidal statement of a Heaven’s Gate member for its summary of dystopian sentiment, which could have served as his personal creed at one time: “Maybe I’m crazy, but I don’t care. I’ve been here 31 years, and there’s nothing here for me.”

Born in 1943 to a working-class family from Schuyler, Nebraska, Zerzan says he had a typical upbringing: his dad was a gas-station attendant, and his mom stayed at home. The family eventually relocated to Oregon, where Zerzan spent his adolescence haying fields and, once, making a bomb that nearly exploded in his parents’ house. On scholarship, he enrolled at Stanford, and he graduated, in 1965, with a bachelor’s degree in political science. The counterculture movement was in full swing, and that autumn Zerzan took part in the Vietnam Day march on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, California. At the time, it was the largest antiwar protest in American history. Ten thousand people were marching to the Oakland Army Base to block the weapons arsenal from being shipped overseas. Just when it looked like they might actually do it, Ken Kesey took the microphone and told everyone to go home. “He then compared activist Paul Jacobs’s podium mannerisms to Mussolini’s, and ended his speech with a harmonica solo and the suggestion that everyone turn their back on the war and simply say, ‘Fuck it,’” a student at the Freie Universität Berlin wrote. In a statement

reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's claim to be personally responsible for World War II, Zerzan later wrote that the protesters' inability to stop the shipment of arms to Vietnam put the blame squarely on their own shoulders. "In other words, we failed that night, and millions died."

In 1971, Zerzan got a master's in American history at San Francisco State. He spent a month in Europe, came home, and enrolled at the University of Southern California to begin doctoral work in labor studies. He passed his exams and became a teacher's assistant, but was in such conflict with his academic advisers that he resigned, announcing his decision in a "flippant postcard" to the chairman of his committee. He spent the next six years living a meager, illicit lifestyle, before moving back to Oregon in the spring of 1981. After meeting Alice Parman, a museum consultant who later became his wife, Zerzan stopped drinking and started going to the library at the University of Oregon. What he was doing, consciously or unconsciously, was validating feelings he'd been having for years. In Karl Marx, he discovered the concept of alienation. In Adorno, he found a cogent rejection of authority. The political philosophy he spent the rest of the decade creating would represent both the intensity and diversity of his emotional life. (This is why reading Zerzan gives you the feeling that nothing short of the world is at stake. For him, it is.)

If it weren't for the Unabomber, Zerzan probably would have continued to live and write in obscurity. But his ability to express Kaczynski's ideas to the reading public—and his support, at the ideological level, of what Kaczynski was doing—made Zerzan what Wikipedia might call an "anarcho-celebrity." After the *Times* interview ran on the front page and media interest began to build, Zerzan was invited to travel and speak all over the world, even delivering a talk at Stanford, his old alma mater. All the attention came with a downside. At home in Eugene, his house was broken into, and his address book and a pair of sneakers were stolen—for their tread. (Officially, Zerzan was never a suspect in the Unabomber case, but unofficially he appears to have been a person of interest.) After Kaczynski was discovered and dragged, bearded and feral, from the mountains of Montana to Sacramento County, Zerzan sent him a letter of introduction. Kaczynski wrote back, and the two became pen pals. Between 1997 and 1998, Zerzan visited Kaczynski in jail—the only writer allowed to do so. Even after Kaczynski was transferred and the visits stopped, Zerzan and Kaczynski traded letters until the late 2000s. Then, because of an obscure and essentially unprovable academic dispute, their friendship ended.

The debate begins ten thousand years ago, when humans stopped hunting and gathering their food and started farming it. Zerzan says that was our fall—the point where we lost contact with nature. To support his argument, he cites Marshall Sahlins, a highly respected anthropologist and professor emeritus at the University of Chicago. Sahlins's 1968 landmark essay, "The Original Affluent Society," argued that in contrast to both our preconceived notions about primitive life and our socially defined ideas of wealth, Paleolithic humans had rich and fulfilling lives. Their needs and wants were simple and attainable; our needs and wants are complicated and hard to attain. They

had an abundance of materials and food sources; we have a growing scarcity. Because primitive people hunted and gathered their food, they didn't have to toil on a farm or store surplus yield; as a result, they worked fewer hours than the average American (three to five hours a day versus our eight or nine). By reexamining primitive life, Sahlins showed that our notions of rich and poor are socially constructed, and as such are part of a problematic normative framework. (Echoing that idea is the work of Sahlins's student David Graeber, who helped organize Occupy Wall Street. Graeber is often credited with coming up with the slogan "We are the 99 percent.")

Eleven years after "The Original Affluent Society" was published, Thomas Wynn, a professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado, gave further credence to Sahlins's theory when he argued that modern intelligence was achieved three hundred thousand years ago. By applying Jean Piaget's model of cognitive development—normally designed to test the aptitude of children—to artifacts from the Lower Paleolithic, he was able to demonstrate that the creation of a simple stone tool required an intelligence identical to ours: one that could envision, in this case, a total of eight distinct stages of stone-tool completion. If we were just as smart then as we are now, the decision not to develop tools, cultivate agriculture, and control the means of production would be deliberate choices based on the belief that we were better off without them. "I've periodically looked through the literature, waiting for somebody to say, 'Well, that's nonsense, it doesn't take much to knock two rocks together,'" Zerzan says. "But I've never seen anyone disprove it. [Wynn says that Neanderthals had] intelligence equal to the adult modern human... That's kind of mind-blowing."

Most of this was met with considerable disdain by Ted Kaczynski. Kaczynski is a survivalist and neo-Luddite. He was born a few months before Zerzan, in 1942, in a small town in northern Illinois. His father worked as a food-products manufacturer, and his mother looked after Ted and his younger brother, David (who was later tricked by the FBI into helping identify the Unabomber). Sickly, precocious, and introverted, Ted Kaczynski was given an IQ test at the age of ten. His score was said to be 167—slightly higher than what is commonly cited as Einstein's. Kaczynski went to Harvard, got his undergraduate degree, then went to the University of Michigan to get his PhD in mathematics. He became an assistant professor in 1967, and was on the fast track to academic stardom in a competitive field when, two years into his professorship, he quit and moved back in with his parents. He gave no reason for his resignation, and one is not easily identifiable. Two years after that, he relocated to a remote cabin in west-central Montana.

For the next two decades, Kaczynski lived by himself, hunting wild game and fertilizing his garden with his own excrement (an ancient technique that, at his trial, was used to argue for his insanity). One day, on a long summer hike, he came across a series of roads built over an isolated plateau that had been one of his favorite spots. The roads were slick, modern, well built. They would never disintegrate or become overgrown. On the way back to his cabin, Kaczynski knelt by a spring and swore revenge to the "spirit of the spring." For nearly twenty years, he bombed people who, in his

mind, were somehow connected to those roads—people who made technology. With a single-minded fixation, Kaczynski had determined that technology was the root of all evil. Tools, and the techniques needed to make them, underlined everything: every invention, every idea, every piece of infrastructure. Tools led to domestication, and domestication led to civilization. The problems of civilization are thus inherent in the machinery used to construct it.

The closest friend Kaczynski had was John Zerzan, but in 2008, after a decade of friendship, Kaczynski wrote a scathing critique of anarcho-primitivism—effectively attacking his longest-standing and most articulate apologist. Zerzan, to this day, has no idea why Kaczynski wrote what he did. He has a copy of *Technological Slavery*—Kaczynski’s book of essays that contains the critique—on the shelf in his living room, but says he finds it too painful to read. “I thought, Man, that’s fucked-up. That’s the end of our relationship.” The critique argued that Zerzan had a romantic view of primitive life—that Paleolithic life wasn’t as peaceful and egalitarian as Zerzan had portrayed it to be, and was in fact brutal and short. The weird, Kaczynski-like thing Kaczynski had done was shoot down an idea that he actually stood for. Kaczynski believes primitive societies are superior to modern ones. He just disagreed with the evidence Zerzan had presented, mostly from Sahlins and Wynn, and wanted to depict a more hard-core vision of primitive life—one in which the same “virtues” he lived by in Montana were prized.

When Kaczynski’s book came out, Zerzan’s friend and anarchic defender Kevin Tucker started looking for avenues of criticism. He found one in a quote about gays in a primitive community. According to Zerzan, Kaczynski deliberately misconstrued the facts to bolster his point. “He was arguing, roughly, that it was the natural order of things for women to have a subservient role, and the natural order of things for gays to be rejected... And he described this thing where this group said gay sex is banned, outlawed. But if you pan back and look at the context of the article—and Kevin did a lot of assiduous work looking at this stuff—it was about a ceremony in which all sex was suspended.” Kaczynski says that values such as gender and sexual equality are aberrations of modernity. As he wrote to a fellow anarchist in Turkey, “The left ‘rebels’ in favor of racial and religious equality, equality for women and homosexuals, humane treatment of animals, and so forth. But these are the values that the American mass media teach us... Leftists have been so thoroughly brainwashed by media propaganda that they are able to ‘rebel’ only in terms of these values, which are values of the techno-industrial system itself.”

Kaczynski has never publicly admitted to fudging the facts, and Zerzan says he won’t continue their dialogue until he does. “Why would I write to him? [What he did was] fucked-up. I’m waiting to hear an apology and a retraction.” With seemingly no hope of settling the debate and restoring their friendship, I wrote to Thomas Wynn, the Paleolithic archeologist Zerzan has cited widely. He told me he had no idea who Zerzan was or that he’d been thrust into the middle of a debate between one of America’s most notorious terrorists and his one-time ally. (Marshall Sahlins, the anthropologist

both writers have cited, declined to be interviewed.) After reading some of the material I forwarded, Wynn told me that Zerzan and Kaczynski use old academic sources that are no longer relevant. Marshall Sahlins's "affluent society"—once a popular theory—has fallen out of favor in the half century since the essay's publication. As far as his own claim that modern human intelligence was achieved three hundred thousand years ago, Wynn says he's changed his mind, "and indeed I now argue that there was significant evolutionary development in cognition after three hundred thousand years." For different reasons, it seems, both Kaczynski and Zerzan are wrong.

A real estate agent might describe the vinyl-sided bungalow in Eugene where Zerzan and Alice live as "cute" and "cozy," meaning small and somewhat out-of-date. It sits at the north end of Whiteaker, a tightly packed neighborhood of postwar bungalows and small, scratchy yards separated by waist-high wooden fences and western Oregon's evergreen perennials. When Alice is home, a silver Honda sits in the driveway—Zerzan still doesn't drive—but on the day of my visit, in early December of 2011, she was at a client's house, designing a new museum installation. Zerzan and I sat in the living room: he in an easy chair, and I was across from him on the couch. On the far side, against the wall, was a tall shelf full of gardening books. The walk-through kitchen had a wood-burning stove at one end, and a couple of cords lay stacked beyond the northern window. When an old dog named Ginger wandered over to sniff my leg, Zerzan told her to "lay down, please."

Now seventy-two, the aging anarchist spends most days combing the Web for stories for his Tuesday-night broadcast on the college radio station KWVA. He hasn't published a book in three years, but his essays still appear on his website and in the in-boxes of friends and acquaintances.<sup>(1)</sup> About once a year, Zerzan is invited to travel somewhere like Russia or Spain, where he meets a younger generation of self-identifying anarchists already familiar with his books and YouTube videos. Asked about the juxtaposition of his antitechnology views and his use of the internet, he shrugs. "There are anarchists who lay that on me: 'You're playing the game. You're talking [about] this thing, but you're streaming live on the radio and shit, and you've got a website and everything.' I go, 'Yeah, but what choice do we have? I hear you, I respect that, but I want to try to contribute, and if I'm sitting by myself in my room, I don't see how I'm really contributing.'" Zerzan now lives almost exclusively off social security: a monthly check from the very same government he wants to destroy. Like Kaczynski, who used technology to kill technologists, Zerzan isn't immune to contradiction. In that 1995 interview with the *New York Times*, he was asked about the battered television in his home. "Like other people," he said, "I have to be narcotized."

After seeing *Surplus* at age seventeen, I bought all of Zerzan's books, beginning with *Elements of Refusal*, and read them so many times the pages fell out. I remember thinking, after reading that first book, that it should have been packaged in caution tape. I

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<sup>(1)</sup> While this sentence was true at the time of writing, Feral House has recently released *Why Hope?: The Stand Against Civilization*, based on these essays.



wasn't mad, just surprised by how extreme it was. Zerzan hates *Star Trek*. Zerzan hates postmodernism. Zerzan hates Mozart and Beethoven, but loves Schoenberg's second string quartet (the composition is completely atonal). He was exasperating and invigorating in roughly equal measure. By the time I had moved on to his third book, *Future Primitive*, I had stopped processing his ideas through an opinion filter and met his basic thesis—that we should kill civilization and start again as hunter-gatherers—with a mostly straight face. I had become more interested in why he thought he was right than in whether I thought he was right or wrong. When I began writing to Zerzan, in my early twenties, I glimpsed the personality that spoke through his books. In emails and, later, in person, he was everything he wasn't in his work—gentle, even-tempered, the kind of person you end up describing as “a sweetheart” and “the nicest guy.” I eventually came to see that the brutality of Zerzan's philosophy had arisen out of, and in proportion to, the intensity of his emotions. He was an optimist who felt betrayed by the world. He wanted to blow it up because he believed there was something beneath it that could be rediscovered. Whereas Kaczynski had slid from this essential hopefulness into despair—from a belief in creation at the cost of destruction to a belief only in destruction—Zerzan had the capacity to be different: to stand at the edge of despair without stepping over, and narrate the truths the rest of us were too scared to see.

By and large, Zerzan has spent the last twenty years doing just that. Beginning with the Unabomber campaign and continuing up through the Battle of Seattle and Occupy Wall Street, he has acted on the fringes of some of the most important political events in recent history. Journalist Chris Hedges has called him one of the “principal ideologues” of the “black bloc” movement in the United States. Born in Europe, black bloc is a protest method in which dissenters dress in dark clothing—camouflaging themselves before breaking windows and burning cop cars. In a similar fashion, it's now fairly common to see protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks, popular after their appearance in the 2006 anarchy-themed film *V for Vendetta* and favored by the group Anonymous. Zerzan denies having anything to do with the black bloc, but his denial is not definitive. For legal reasons, and also because of his beliefs, he has been known to avoid acknowledging the extent of his work in public. (His books begin with an “anti-copyright,” and the directive to steal and pirate the text as desired.) Zerzan has had a long-standing friendship with Micah White, the former senior editor of *Adbusters*, who co-instigated Occupy Wall Street with his publisher, Kalle Lasn. White was trading ideas with Zerzan between the 2011 New Year, when the Arab Spring began, and the autumn of that same year, when a few hundred people camped out in a small park in Lower Manhattan. When Mattathias Schwartz profiled White and Lasn for a November 2011 issue of the *New Yorker*, White tried to give credit to Zerzan, but that part never made it into print.

The media's criticism of Occupy Wall Street—that the protesters couldn't agree on a unified message—never felt completely right to me. Surely the problem wasn't the number of conflicting opinions but the number of things to object to, not all of which

could easily fit on the front of a placard. Consider not just the financial inequality between rich and poor, but the war, famine, and disease that ravage the third world; the armed conflicts in Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Mexico, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and now Ukraine; the looming end of oil production; the seemingly endless string of massive natural disasters; the lack of educational opportunities in third-, second-, and first-world countries; overpopulation; climate change; species and plant extinction; gender inequality; bigotry, sexism, and racism; the rapid rise of mental health issues; the scarcity of clean water; and so on. In the United States, political bureaucracy and dwindling voter confidence top the list of afflictions. At the time of this writing, confidence in Congress has hit historic lows. Obama is at his lowest approval rating ever. The general public has come to view politics with a mixture of indifference and contempt, and why shouldn't it? While Obama struggles to legislate background checks for people who want to buy guns, the Russian army invades Crimea. While Obama considers executive authority to put a carbon regulation on coal plants, China flattens seven hundred mountains. The United States, land of the free, is being held captive by its own democratic processes, while other countries, using authoritarian rule, act freely. It's in these moments that anarchy lays its best hand, not as a credible political system or hypothetical solution to the world's problems, but in its implied sense of betrayal—the anger of a faith that's been tried, tested, and finally broken. “Democracy?” Zerzan spits out. “Who believes in that shit anymore?”

One person who still believes in democracy is Steven Pinker. The popular science writer's most recent work, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, argues that the adoption of “Enlightenment humanism” is responsible for a worldwide decline in violence, and that our current era is the most peaceful in human history. His argument is supported by diagrams that show downward trends in types of violence (such as colonial and civil), and upward trends in peaceful movements, such as children's and women's rights. In what Zerzan and Kaczynski must have felt was a personal attack, Pinker reinforces the Hobbesian notion that primitive life was “nasty, brutish, and short,” claiming that roughly 15 percent of hunter-gatherers died violently. By comparison, only 3 percent of Europeans were murdered during the bloodiest periods in its history (the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries). Pinker makes other, counterintuitive observations. World War II killed over fifty million people. The Mongol invasion killed nearly forty million. Hitler used firing squads and gas chambers—weapons of mass execution that brought instant death. The Mongols used swords, catapults, bows and arrows, axes, and spears. On a scale of sheer savagery, the Mongol conquests are at least comparable to the deadliest war in history—seven hundred years before it happened. Pinker says that since 1945 we've lived in “the Long Peace,” with fewer civil wars, genocides, and acts of terrorism than at any other time in history. Groups that have been historically marginalized—children, women, gays, animals, and ethnic minorities—now have more rights than ever before. In a single sentence that could represent the sum of Pinker's philosophy, and the opposite of Zerzan's,

Pinker writes, “Adjudication by an armed authority appears to be the most effective general violence-reduction technique ever invented.”

Pinker grew up in Montreal. As a teenager, he was a self-described anarchist. “I laughed off my parents’ argument that if the government ever laid down its arms all hell would break loose,” he writes in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, his Pulitzer Prize–nominated critique of tabula rasa theories of social science (the belief that the human mind is unlimited and almost infinitely malleable). In the autumn of 1969, the Montreal police force went on strike and lawlessness prevailed: fires burned, banks were looted, and someone was shot. By the time the army arrived, and order was returned to the city, Pinker had changed his mind about anarchy. “At least he grounds it in something,” Zerzan says. “But why doesn’t he ground it in a lot of other evidence, like the flooding in this country, for example, where people seemingly always go and sandbag other people’s houses instead of looting them? Why is that a constant? Or in the blackouts—all of the blackouts, the bigger ones in this country that I know about—you don’t have a big jump in rape or assault or anything like that... In other words, what I’m just saying is you could put out all kinds of contrary evidence, even though we’re told from the beginning of civilization that it’s dangerous and it’s violent and you’re lucky you’re here with the army and the temple and everything—the walls of the city. Same thing they’re saying now. But how much is it true?”

*Better Angels* spends over eight hundred pages trying to answer that question. Is *civilization* a synonym for *peace*, and is *anarchy* its antonym? Are people innately good or bad? Do we inherit our behavior from nature or nurture or both? In his review of Pinker’s book for *Prospect* magazine, the British political philosopher John N. Gray says that the author’s mission was doomed from the outset. Pinker is a Darwinian evolutionary psychologist. Gray says that it’s not only un-Darwinian but unscientific to suggest that a mere idea, such as humanism, can cause the human condition to evolve. Humanism, the doctrine of the individual, has come to be associated with reason, the rule of law, and science. But to say that science will uphold the Enlightenment’s view of reason is to conflate a method of inquiry with an ideological system, and “there can be no guarantee that science will vindicate Enlightenment ideals of human rationality. Science could just as well end up showing them to be unrealisable.” At the very least, history has shown not only that humans are unreasonable, but that violence and peace are codependent. The West may have experienced a decline in violence following World War II, but our peace has come at the cost of war in other parts of the world. And that’s only the most obvious kind of violence. A professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, uses the phrase “slow violence” to describe harmful actions that take years to be felt socially, culturally, and environmentally. Pinker makes no mention, for instance, of the plants and animals that are going extinct at unprecedented rates, or the long-term causal effects of civilization itself. (“The obvious fact that civilization is chronic war all the time,” Zerzan says.)

There is also doubt about whether violence is uniformly bad. There was violence during the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War. There

was violence during the American Civil War, the Cuban Revolution, and the Arab Spring. If we remove the violence from these insurrections, do we not also dismiss their root causes? Sometimes anarchy is the result of government-sponsored genocide. Sometimes it's the result of greed, inequality, racism, oppression, and authoritarian heavy-handedness. Sometimes it's the result of that sense of placated peace Ted Kaczynski couldn't live with. In any case, the issue of whether the means and ends are justified should be open to interpretation and debate, but rather than question established values and beliefs, Gary Greenberg says that we simplify difficult moral questions in order to make them more understandable. At the Unabomber trial, Kaczynski was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Officially, his legal team argued for sparing his life because of this—federal law prevents the execution of mentally disabled prisoners—but the real reason, according to many, was to quell popular support for his antitechnology views. “If you decided that you wanted to have a diagnosis that would discredit a political figure,” Greenberg says, “the disease for you would be paranoid schizophrenia.” The cost of oversimplifying ethical issues is almost certainly an inflated sense of our human progress. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country, and spends nearly as much on defense as the next fourteen countries combined. The only rational response to Pinker's implied statement “We have peace” is the corresponding question “At what cost?”

“What I talk about a lot is shooting stuff,” Zerzan says. “And now it's more family shootings. Parents slaughtering the whole family and then shooting themselves. That's nothing that ever happened before. You can tell what's unprecedented in terms of the scope of things, in terms of the dailiness of it. Damn. And yet it doesn't permeate. Obama could call a meeting and say, ‘Look, this is just fucking madness here. It's just so insane. We've got to stop.’ But of course absolutely no one says anything about the shootings. Or if they do, it's frankly the stupidest things: ‘America's full of guns.’” Zerzan shifts into sarcasm. “*Yeah, America's full of guns...* My dad was an NRA guy, a flag-waving, conservative guy. Not very well educated. But he had a reverence when he taught my brother and me to handle firearms. You never point the muzzle of the gun anywhere near anyone. It's still burned into my head... Not to mention taking a gun to school and wiping out twenty classmates. I don't know if anybody ever thought about it, but they certainly never did it. Now, in this country, every day you read about shit like that. What the hell?”

Increasingly, Zerzan and others say these symptoms amount to a totality—the extreme ruination of our environment and psyche, at the cost, surely, of our own mass extinction. Our culture now brims with references to that extinction, from industry-sustaining books like *The Hunger Games* and their Hollywood adaptations to movies like *Elysium*, *Oblivion*, and *The Purge*, all released in the same year. Scientists worldwide are observing catastrophic climate changes. The “Red List,” an international tally of highly endangered species in the wild, cites over twenty thousand animals and plants—and probably a great many more—that are on the verge of extinction. Faced with such widespread devastation, we turn to those who tell us how we got here and

how we're going to get out. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud says that we can correctly blame civilization for being "a great part of our misery," but that the idea that we can "give it up and go back to primitive conditions" is no solution. When I mentioned the book to Gary Greenberg, he said Freud presents a false dichotomy: "You have your choice: you can live like a wild animal, kill or be killed, fuck or be fucked, whatever. Or you can cut off the tip of your dick and live a bourgeois life. Those are your choices." The third, sensible course is moderation. "You live with ambivalence. You live in 'This is the best you can do.' You have to be a stoic and you do the best you can. That may sound like a total cop-out, but you and I aren't going to solve this problem knowing that the issue started with agriculture. I think that's probably true. It's interesting, and it's really worth thinking about because it enriches your understanding of your position, but you're not going to, like, erase agriculture. So you do the best you can. You recycle, you reuse, and in the end it may be that we find another way to respond politically."

A decade into his social-security pension, Zerzan is growing accustomed to moderation. In fact, over the course of our afternoon together, I felt something I hadn't sensed before, either in his books or through our intermittent correspondence: compromise. An early critic of *Elements of Refusal* wrote that the book made you want to "kill your landlord, boss, TV, alarm clock, *Oxford English Dictionary*, an art-museum curator and the local horticulturist." Now Zerzan is married to a museum consultant, watches TV, has books on horticulture, and cites *The Oxford English Dictionary* in his literary work. One might point to these inconsistencies as evidence of Zerzan's weakness and irrelevance. The violent anarchist group Individualists Tending Toward the Wild calls Zerzan a "pseudo-critic of civilization." The group views his compromises as unforgivable ideological betrayals—but seen a different way they are signs of temperance, indications that Zerzan, in his old age, is finding balance. "When I wrote [my earlier] stuff, mostly in the '80s, I was feeling very isolated," Zerzan says. "I felt I had to make this frontal attack with all guns blazing and not allow any kind of nuance or anything."

Zerzan's move toward moderation has brought peace to his personal life. In recent years, he has been reunited with his estranged daughter, Monika, and her mother. Monika has no children, but Alice's daughter has kids, and Zerzan has reprised his old babysitting role, this time for free. "Alice and I are so close. She works here and we spend all our time together, and it never gets boring. I just never get enough of it. And like I said, to have Jane and Hugh so close, I'm always calling up and saying, 'You want to go out? I'll come over.' They're glad because they both work. I'm happy, so happy to go there, and to be on such good terms now with Monika, my daughter. Just everything. I've got a fabulous life." Despite his contentment, Zerzan remains adamant about some ideas, like his conviction that hunter-gatherers had a better life than ours. An email to Thomas Wynn came back with this response: "I am afraid I must agree with Pinker... Paleolithic life was not an Eden. To be sure, the problems were different, but there were still many sources of anxiety, fear, and disruption." Wynn said he understood the desire to romanticize Paleolithic culture, "but it was a tough

life, with its own dangers and unpleasantness.” We can look to the past for inspiration “without seeing it as a solution to our very modern problems.”

When the living-room clock struck three, I realized I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Zerzan and I were supposed to have lunch at a nearby diner, but he’d shown up, red-faced and wearing shorts, saying he’d already eaten. I was glad we’d come here instead. After I shut off the tape recorder, Zerzan eased himself out of his chair, waking the sleeping dog at his feet, and gave me a tour of the rest of the house. Through the kitchen, down a small hall, we passed the office where Alice types up her husband’s handwritten essays (she also edits his books and comes up with most of the titles). Adjacent to the office were framed copies of notices for Zerzan’s many speaking engagements: advertisements for the guy who says we should blow up the world. “Alice likes to keep them,” he said, nodding at the wall. At the end of the hall, a door led onto a small, square yard, where there were signs of renovation. Zerzan told me that he and his wife had recently removed a hazel tree. They were building raised garden beds, and that tree was getting in the way. Now there’s more room, he said. “And more light.”

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Zander Sherman  
Anarchy in the USA

Four years after occupy wall street, meet the man who's been quietly fanning the flames of the country's most important insurrectionary movements.  
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