

Intro to Zerzan

Facing the '80s: Promise or Collapse?

Fifth Estate Collective

1980

Related: see The Promise of the '80s

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We perhaps owe John Zerzan a debt of gratitude for the research that has gone into his essay *The Promise of the '80s*, for it graphically demonstrates to us what we have suspected all along—that all is not well with the rule of capital. In fact, the litany of decomposition presented both among the institutions of rule and its subjects is shown to be so widespread and systemic that one can conclude little else than that the rulers will no longer be able to govern as they have, due to the massive erosion of loyalty to the reigning mode of domination.

If we, in fact, have arrived at this critical juncture for both the political economy of capital and its culture, what then are we to make of this shambles of human association? Zerzan offers us precious little in terms of predictions, the potential for revolution or even a convenient framework or perspective through which to view our mess. As each statistic is piled on top of another, as page after page goes by depicting the increasing human misery and the generalized sense of purposelessness, the mind demands to know, “What does it all mean? If you were able to find out things are so bad, can’t you also tell us what should be done or at least how to fix it in our consciousness in an orderly manner?” But no, he can’t and each bone-bare headline or quote from some despicable journal of misery only whets our appetite for more information and analysis, and rather than answer questions, only more are posed.

What does the rise in arson and random violence mean?; has it always been with us or are we at a new stage of disorder? What is the function of “the revolt against work?”; does it provide an authentic strike against capital or is it a recuperation which fits neatly into the progression of the economy? How does one interpret events such as the Levittown riots?; are they acts of rebellion or people only angry at their inability to have adequate gasoline to drive to work and shopping centers? Does the drop in student test scores signify a healthy rejection of authoritarian schools or a population getting increasingly stupid and robot-like, fit only for TV viewing. Does the increasing trend of defeated union elections and decertification campaigns mean workers are becoming clearer on the police functions of unions or are we entering a period of management ascendancy? The questions arise endlessly while answers are not even hinted at and perhaps it is not even fair to suggest that they should have been for to have done so would mean a book-length essay on each topic.

What does come across in this compilation of examples of social hemorrhaging is the clear announcement that this era is a significant period of transition. The collapse of the contemporary mode of rule creates an open situation where the rulers will either develop new forms of domination more fitting for the age or people will define themselves in revolutionary terms.

These alternatives seem even that much more critical upon reading John’s essay and realizing to what extent the social disintegration has already progressed. No ruling order is going to leave the field simply because one particular method of governing has suddenly (or slowly) proven inadequate for the task of ruling. Rather, the ruling

forces are moving apace with the process of dislocation to devise substitute variants of rule and in such a way that the transition will take place in a manner which is hardly noticed by those it is being worked upon.

Although unspoken, John sees the beginnings of a human struggle in the statistics of chaos he cites—people beginning to rebel against the everyday humiliations which are the touchstones of life in this society. John has always exhibited a confidence that acts of rebellion and non-cooperation will begin a larger process of contestation wherein people will begin to redefine themselves in terms of a “radical break.” Some of us in Detroit have expressed less confidence in the potential results of this decomposition and feel that unless rebellious behavior is infused with a conscious desire for revolution, all of the rage, ennui, and disaffection so aptly described in *The Promise of the '80s* will be regrouped in an authoritarian manner by either the ruling class, the right or the left (in that order of probability).

What we fear is that this epidemic of dissatisfaction is only with the form of this system and not its content. It seems to us that much of the anxiety many people feel about the contemporary world stems, not so much from a hatred of the state, all rulers, capital and all things “modern,” but rather that the current crop of leaders are unworthy of worship; that the institutions of this society are so vitiated that one cannot grovel before them; that patriotism, the family, the army, schools, religion, etc. have all lost their traditional ability to command loyalty—in other words, people who are dissatisfied with life because they have no ruler or code of domination they can comfortably signal their submission to. We should demand from others what we demand from ourselves: a conscious assent to live differently than people have since the rise of state society; a desire to be free from external constraints and to live the life of humans, not machines. Without a change in the mass character structure of people and their desires, many of those presently exhibiting revolt and anger—from Brenda Spencer to the Levittown rioters—could easily re-appear wearing uniforms and singing the praises of a new regime.

Perhaps even to have raised this issue is unfair since John has not, but we are simply using his data of misery in the way most of us will—within a framework we have previously developed for viewing the world. However, after having read through his exhausting summary of what this age has produced, we cannot say we did not know what was approaching or that we were not forewarned. Everything else is up to us.

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