

# A World is Faltering

The '80s so far

John Zerzan

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## Fifth Estate Introduction

It is impossible to give any credence to the statistics of disaffection and disintegration assembled here by John Zerzan and at the same time take seriously a recent survey in which the vast majority of Americans asserted to pollster George Gallup that they were "satisfied with their lives." Our tendency, as the reader might imagine, is to accept John's wide-ranging compilations as closer to the truth than the response to a simplistic question posed by a poll-taker.

But why can't we take people at their word? Aren't we putting ourselves in the position of telling people that they're unhappy when they say they are not?

It has been said that what keeps our society from coming unglued is the mistaken belief that, despite one's own unhappiness, everyone else is happy. The deep anxiety people feel in the face of this hysterical optimism-reinforced by the images of ecstatic consumption paraded across the TV screens and billboards-makes people very reluctant to admit that they are unhappy. When questioners go beyond the knee-jerk responses engendered by a simplistic question like "Are you satisfied?", a complexity of responses emerges and the depths of peoples' fears and uncertainty begin to be plumbed.

More telling than what people say about their happiness or unhappiness are the enumerations of misery that one may find presented item by item almost everywhere, but rarely collected into a complete portrait of us as a people. Eric Fromm, in *The Sane Society*, said that if one took the gross statistics of crime, violence, alcoholism, mental illness, drug addiction, divorce and a host of other mental and physical plagues affecting the American people, and applied them to a single individual, he or she would emerge as a dreadfully sick, unhappy, and dangerous person. This nation cannot escape a similar comparison, despite the fact that polls such as the one in question are designed to avoid such a comparison by making it appear that each individual's personal grief is unique to her, its cause an intrinsic personality flaw rather than an effect of a damaged social fabric.

John assembles these surveys every so often (see "Promise of the '80s," in FE #302, June 1, 1980) probably to remind himself and us that beneath the shiny exterior of American culture things are cracking, that the normal ways of governing are floundering and that those in power are flailing about searching for new ways to secure us in our pre-determined ruts. John has occasionally been accused of a mechanistic approach in collecting such data, but it would be contrary to his position to contend that he thinks the road to revolution leads directly from job burn-out and tax avoidance. Rather, these junctures or ruptures promise what he accurately describes as the potential for revolution, with allegiance at a low ebb, mystifications faltering, and people generally suspicious of authority.

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From new levels of boredom and the digital/TV screen mentality of the high technology onslaught, to mounting physical pollution and economic decay, only the incidentals of alienation have changed at all in the past four years.

A climate of (often misdirected) violence is also greatly in evidence; as so many elements of modern life cheapen living, the relevance of “life is cheap,” once thought applicable mainly elsewhere, emerges around us. In the mid-’80s the potential promise lies solely in the conclusion that the world is even closer to collapse.

Society’s negation has moved forward; and in the decomposition of the old world it is increasingly accurate to speak, with Sanguinetti, of that “false consciousness which still reigns, but no longer governs.” As the century runs down, so does, faster and faster, its store of effective illusions.

There is no guarantee how much humanness will survive to replace repressive emptiness with an unfettered life spirit. For an agonizing toll is being registered on all our sensibilities. As the refrain of John Cougar’s best-selling record of 1982, “Jack and Diane,” put it, “Oh yeah, life goes on / Long after the thrill of living is gone.”

The supermarket tabloids also reflect the rampant sense of generalized pain and loss, with their weekly parade of features on depression, fear of aging, stress and the like. Similarly, a flow of advertising for Stressgard, Stress Formula vitamins, etc. A September 21, 1981 *Time* essay, “The Burnout of Almost Everyone”: “Today the smell of psychological wiring on fire is everywhere ... Burnout is pre-eminently the disease of the thwarted; it is a frustration so profound that it exhausts body and morale.” In the mid-’80s this condition seems to be even more widespread, if possible; for example, Procaccini and Kiefaber’s popular 1983 work, *Parent Burnout*, and *Time*’s June 6, 1983 cover story, “Stress!”, introduced by a contorted, screaming face.

A prior psychological and social stability is giving way to an assault upon the young by these realities of dominated life. Marie Winn’s *Children Without Childhood* (1983) describes a fundamental shift away from the condition of children as innocents protected from the world, from a conception of childhood that was the norm until just a very few years ago. Intimate awareness of drugs and violence at very early ages, for example, is a brutalizing consequence of the awareness of the falseness of such institutions as the nuclear family, religion, and government.

Not only is the traditional family continuing to fall apart, but love itself seems to be worn down more quickly by the strains and deprivation of the twilight of capitalism. The 1980 census figures reveal a marked trend toward the one-person household, to the accompaniment of articles such as, “The Reasons Men and Women Are Raging at Each Other All of a Sudden” (*Cosmopolitan*, November 1982).

Naturally, many of the young seem profoundly horrified by what they are expected to live under. “Suicide Among Preschoolers on Rise” was the topic of a May 15, 1983 UPI feature, while *U.S. News & World Report*’s June 20, 1983 “Behind a Surge in Suicides of Young People” discussed the suicide trend among youth. *Newsweek* for August 15, 1983 reported that the 15-to-24-year-old age group is the only segment of the population whose death rate has increased in recent years, and that among 15- to 19-year-olds, suicide is now the second leading cause of death, after traffic accidents, many of which, in fact, are suspected suicides.

Anorexia nervosa (self-induced starvation) and bulimia (a pattern of gorging followed by vomiting) are rapidly spreading phenomena among women. First registered in the popular media in the mid-’70s, the growth of these afflictions had been discussed in such articles as “The Binge-Purge: Syndrome” (*Newsweek*, November 2, 1981) and “Anorexia: the ‘Starving Disease’ Epidemic” (*U.S. News & World Report*, August 30, 1982). The October 1983 *Ms.* asks, “Is the Binge-Purge Cycle Catching?” while noting that “At least half the women on campus today suffer from some kind of eating disorder.”

A sudden surge in heroin use among various social classes, from blue-collar workers to Kennedy offspring drew much media attention during the second half of 1983.

## **Rising Tide of Mediocrity in Education**

Continued growth in the dimensions of alcohol abuse has brought a big turnabout from the ’70s, namely the tendency of states to raise the legal drinking age. A *Redbook* (June 1982) survey “revealed the startling news that problem drinking is increasing dramatically among women who are under the age of 35. The *Wall Street Journal* of February 8, 1983 addressed the connection between brawling, failing grades, and drinking in “Colleges Try to Combat Rampant Alcohol Use, But With Little Effect.” The first federally funded study on the subject in fifty years, *Alcohol and Public Policy: Beyond the Shadow of Prohibition*, attracted attention in summer 1983 with its recommendation of a national campaign to slash alcohol consumption.

At the same time, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, issued in May, had been causing more of a stir by its devastating indictment of the American education system; the 18-month study warned of “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people,” as kids have perhaps never been so turned off by school.

Gambling has been multiplying so rapidly as to be measured in fractions of the national economy and to cause some social critics to refer to it as a craze that reflects basic changes in public attitudes toward work and money. “Gambling Rage: Out of Control” (*U.S. News & World Report*, May 30, 1983) depicts a growing popular “urge to buck the odds and take a chance on anything.”

Another development receiving scrutiny in the early and mid-’80s is massive avoidance of taxes. The Tax-Evasion Virus” (*Psychology Today*, March 1982) employed a medical metaphor to opine that “In the epidemiology of cheating, there is...contagion—and no vaccine in sight.” Featured in *Business Week* for April 5, 1982 was “The Underground Economy’s Hidden Force,” a lengthy discussion of the “startling growth” of the refusal to report income for the purpose of avoiding taxes, which posits distrust of government as its central element. Time’s March 28, 1983 cover story, “Cheating by the Millions”, also focused on the growing, open acceptance even of blatant tax evasion. Time noted that tax revenue lost to fraud tripled from 1973 to 1981 and projected that ’83 losses (Possibly \$300 billion) may entail a ten-fold jump over those of 1973.

In the military, reports of sabotage and the near-universal use of drugs continue to appear routinely, along with articles indicating the unreliability of enlisted persons as mindless instruments of destruction. The total fiasco of the April 1980 mission to rescue the American embassy hostages in Iran reflected, to many, the combat unreadiness of armed services personnel as a whole. During the following two years, political commentators of every stripe were astonished by the wholesale non-compliance which met a pre-draft registration law, as about one million 19- and 20-year-olds ignored the federal requirement to sign up. (In the spring of 1982 an annual reserve duty call-up in the Ukraine had to be canceled when too few reported.)

If the “New Nationalism” component of the stillborn New Right movement of the early ’80s seemed to exist mainly as a media creation, like the Moral Majority, the alleged rise of the Ku Klux Klan also proved non-existent. In 1925, 40,000 had marched in a Washington, D.C. rally; at their next Washington show of strength, on November 27, 1982, fewer than 40 appeared. And the thousands of counter-demonstrators on hand, breaking the confines of leftist ritual provided for them, used the occasion to riot, looting shops and injuring ten police.

The election of Reagan produced no social or ideological results for the Right; its efforts in favor of school prayer and creationism, and against abortion and conservation, clearly failed. A Louis Harris poll of January 1983 expressed Americans’ desire for tougher anti-pollution laws, counter to the Reagan administration’s hopes to use the depth of recession for a severe weakening of environmental statutes. Meanwhile, articles like “Behind the Public’s Negative Attitude Toward Business” (*U.S. News & World Report*, July 12, 1982) and “A Red Light for Scofflaws” (*Time*, Essay, January 24, 1983), which editorialized about the “extreme infectiousness” of the current spirit of generally ignoring laws of all kinds, are published frequently.

## **Alienation Cuts Deeper than Ever Before**

In a February 1983 Louis Harris poll on alienation, a record 62% registered a bitter estrangement from the idea of the supposed legitimacy of the rich and powerful, and leadership in general. “Clearly, alienation has cut deeper into the adult population of America than ever before,” concluded Harris. Robert Wuthnow, “Moral Crisis in American Capitalism” *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1983), analyzed an unprecedented “fundamental uncertainty about the institutions of capitalism.” And as the percentage of voters declines still further, young people are demonstrating an utter disinterest in politics. “Civics Gap: Alarming Challenge” (*U.S. News & World Report*, April 25, 1983) featured former Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer, who spoke of an “upsurge of apathy and decline in public understanding” of government among students.

In the world of work, or should one say anti-work, the ’80s continue to evidence a deepening disaffection. The reports and studies fuel countless stories on high turnover, the chronic “productivity crisis”, growing “time theft”, the sharp increase (since 1974) of people interested only in part-time work, as well as on job stress, unemployment

insurance “abuse”, etc.—the aspects of work refusal are virtually countless, and unabating. *Dun’s Business Month* for October 1982 dealt with the \$40 billion a year “High Cost of Employee Theft,” describing it as a “major cause of business failures,” while June 1983 revealed a three-year study by the Justice Department that detailed extremely widespread “employee pilferage” (Associated Press, June 12, 1983). *Nation’s Business* (July 1983) followed by “How to Foil Employee Crime: Inside Thefts Can Destroy a Business—And Often Do.” The continued strong growth in the use of lie detectors by employers is one obvious corollary to this facet of the vanishing of the work ethic.

Another prominent part of the syndrome, in terms of the mid-’80s emphases, is referred to in *Business Horizons’* “Employee Substance Abuse: Epidemic of the Eighties” (July/August 1983), and by *Newsweek’s* “Taking Drugs on the Job” cover story (August 22, 1983), which outlined its “enormous” dimensions and cost to the economy.

The movement toward worker participation as a stabilizing principle gains ground against the backdrop of anti-work phenomena. The recession of 1981–83 was used by managers as a pressure to seek the best terms for the new rules; it did not prevent their institution, contrary to most predictions. Authority relations, in this area as elsewhere, will have to be increasingly participationist or they will collapse all the sooner.

In mid-September 1982, the first nationally sponsored conference on labor-management cooperation was held, with some 900 union, company, and government officials taking part. The Labor Department announced it would promote and encourage shop floor collaboration, a new U.S. policy aimed of course at undercutting worker discipline.

Chrysler Corporation Chairman Lee Iacocca, in a December 1982 speech to the Commercial Club of Boston, spoke of the crucial need to “get everyone on the same team—labor, management, and the government.” He repeated this idea on June 30, 1983 to enthusiastic union representatives as the first businessman to address Michigan’s AFL-CIO convention in its 25-year history. Similarly, the “Let’s Work Together” series of spots by the radio and TV networks’ Broadcasting Industry Committee to Improve American Productivity were widely aired and Ford’s two-page ad entitled “A Breakthrough in Labor Relations Has Helped Create the Highest Quality Vehicles in America” appeared prominently in 1983.

## **New Organizational Model for the Workplace**

Since the ’70s the new organizational model, at all levels, has been steadily moving forward. The spring 1982 *Journal of Contemporary Business* focused on “Theory X, Y, Z, or ?: Reshaping the American Workplace.” John Simmons and William J. Mares’ “Reforming Work” (*New York Times*, October 25, 1982) reported a “dramatically increased employee participation in management and ownership,” aimed at reducing alienation and reversing the productivity decline, and amounting to “a quiet revolution... taking place on shop floors and in offices across America.” The shift to tripartite negotiations in auto, steel and construction were examples of a tendency toward collaboration that must be expanded, according to “Ideology Revisited: America Looks Ahead” by David A. Heenan (*Sloan Management Review*, Winter 1982). Its stress on implementing a “one nation indivisible” solution reflects the powerful disintegrative energies at large and points in the direction of a fascist choice of alternatives.

Among the many other influential references in fairly recent publications are Donald N. Scobel’s “Business and Labor—from Adversaries to Allies” in the November-December 1982 *Harvard Business Review*, and D. Quinn Mills’ March 1983 *Monthly Labor Review* offering, “Reforming the U.S. System of Collective Bargaining”, which concludes that a new, official collaborative set-up is essential to avoid a high degree of “economic and social unrest” which would be counter to the interest “of the Nation as a whole.”

Meanwhile, by the middle of 1983, the newsweeklies and monthly magazines had devoted much space to Harvard’s Robert Reich, a Democratic Party advisor, whose *The Next American Frontier* advocates tripartite planning as an alternative to Reagan’s neo-free market failures and beyond. The August 28, 1983 *New York Times Magazine* discussed an emerging national policy emphasis in this area, centering on the Industrial Policy Study Group made up of bankers, union officials, politicians, and high-tech corporation heads, and meeting at the AFL-CIO national headquarters. This corporatist tendency (see Frank Hearn, “The Corporatist Mood in the United States”, *Telos*, No. 56, useful for its bibliographic notes, is not confined to the U.S.; on August 1, 1983 a new USSR “Law on Work Col-

lectives,” featuring worker participation, was enacted under the direction of Andropov, who came to power in late 1982 expressly to combat a severe Soviet work refusal.

Of course before the '80s there were digital watches, pocket calculators, and Star Wars. But easily the biggest social impact of the early to middle years of the decade, occurring with developing changes in work organization, has been that of the high tech explosion with its promise of video games and computers for every business, dwelling and school.

1982 was the full inauguration of this blitz, as observed by such as “Computers for the Masses: The Revolution Is Just Beginning” early in the year (*U.S. News & World Report*, January 3, 1982), and *Time's* January 3, 1983 cover story, “A New World Dawns,” which proclaimed the computer Man of the Year for 1982.

The outlines are well-known to everyone, even though the meaning of this latest technological wave has been publicly discussed almost not at all. Suddenly we are in the Information Age, its benign-and inevitable-consequences to be merely accepted as facts of life. A two-page IBM ad announced the “new era” under the heading, “Information: There’s Growing Agreement that It’s the Name of the Age We Live In.” A TRW, Inc. ad of 1983 began, “There Was a Time When There was Time. Once we could spend time with a new piece of information,” proceeding to boast of the speed with which its computer systems can deal with “trillions of bits of information.” But the processing of data-“information”-has nothing to do with understanding, and what comes to mind here is the social affliction just around the corner suggested in Ted Mooney’s 1982 novel, *Easy Travel to Other Planets*, that of “information sickness.”

## **Technology Further Colonizes Each New Generation**

It is also becoming ever more obvious that technology renders each succeeding generation more technology-dependent, further separated from nature, more fully colonized by the inauthentic and empty. The notion of people as appendages of machines, evoked in terms of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialism, is even more relevant today. Apple Computer offered its product to the late 1983 consumer with the counsel, “Think of It as a Maserati for Your Mind,” in a debasement of individuality and creation echoed by the claims that typing an instruction on a computer results in art or that word processors enable one to write. We become weaker, reduced, infantilized.

Meanwhile this barren future’s dawning is heralded especially for the young, who may be expected to have been prepared for this contrived world by the ugliness and boredom of today’s. “Computer Camps for Kids,” reveals a July 19, 1982 *Newsweek* article, followed by a look at education in that magazine’s December 27, 1982 issue, entitled “The Great Computer Frenzy.” The Apple Company announced in July 1983 its plan to provide free computers for every public school in California that asked for one, as colleges began to require that students purchase computers as part of registration. Howard Rheingold’s “Video Games Go to School” (*Psychology Today*, September 1983) discussed the “profound transformation” of education represented by the introduction of classroom computers.

Benjamin Compaine’s “The New Literacy” (*Science Digest*, March 1983) matter-of-factly states that the ability to manipulate a computer will soon be the criterion of literacy. One can perhaps already see some of the products along this line of high tech culture, such as the vacuous *USA Today*, “the Nation’s Newspaper via Satellite,” which arrived in 1983. The irony in the contrast between the claims of fulfillment and empowerment as promised by further “progress” and its real sterility and impoverishment is stunning. And occasionally it is almost funny, as in the case of CBS-TV’s July 7, 1983 presentation, “1984 Revisited.” The program zeroed in on the rise of the computer state and the consequent loss of privacy, etc. and was sponsored by Exxon Office Systems, whose frequent commercials featured a view of endless video display terminals lined up in a huge, faceless office, which could have graced the cover of any dystopian novel.

Amitai Etzioni’s *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1982) takes aim at an individualism that in view of this sociologist, has disastrously advanced since the '60s to the point of threatening American society itself. The search for self-fulfillment, which involves a “retreat from work” and an “inability to defer gratification,” affects 80% of the population and, according to Etzioni, is crippling virtually all the institutions that mediate between the individual and the state. While this “Immodest Agenda” is essentially a warning and a wish

by one hoping to preserve and even renew the present order, others can see in high tech the tools of uniformity and “objective” restraints necessary to do precisely that.

## **Computerization: Dispensing with the Proletariat**

Computer entrepreneur Steven Wozniak staged a 3-day “Us Festival” in Southern California over the 1982 Labor Day weekend, intended to help transcend the threatening forces of the “me generation” by introducing the 400,000 music fans to a giant computer pavilion and such high tech wonders as fifty-foot video screens. Steven Levy’s “Bliss, Microchips and Rock & Roll” (*Rolling Stone*, October 14, 1982) called this effort “the marriage of rock and computer technology.” The efficacy of this spectacle may be doubted, however, especially considering the fate of the second US festival, also held in San Bernadino county, during Memorial Day weekend, 1983. Several injuries occurred, and part of the crowd tore down fences, threw bottles at sheriff’s deputies and rammed their cars into police cruisers.

Certainly the project of computerizing work, in the neo-Taylorist direction of quantifying and tightly regulating employee output, is a major part of technology’s combat with troublesome and capricious humanity. John Andrew’s “Terminal Tedium” (*Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 1983) is typical of many articles describing the strong antipathy to computer-systematized work. Workers in a Blue Shield office in Massachusetts, for example, denounced the electronic set-up as simply an unbearable sweatshop and told Andrew they wouldn’t be there long. In the May 15, 1983 *New York Times*, Richard McGahey (“High Tech, Low Hopes”) wrote of the oppressive, low-paid work, such as computer assembly, that underlies the clean, dazzling facade of the new developments and warned of “increased class tensions.”

With industrial robotics one detects high technology’s wishful thinking that capital could reproduce itself while dispensing with an undesirable proletariat. The growing number of “telecommuters”, or those performing piece-work at home before computer screens, expresses some of this urge and is also part of a more general, isolating impulse at large. From the jump in one-person households to increased emphasis on “home entertainment center” type equipment, portable music headgear and the like, we seem to be shrinking away from our social selves. High technology accelerates a sense of false self-sufficiency; an early 1983 ad for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry cited new breakthroughs in home computers, including the not wholly unserious prediction that “Soon your refrigerator will talk to you even if no-one else will.”

And yet despite the great barrage of enticements of all kinds, not forgetting economic pressures, in the schools, the media and elsewhere, much popular resistance to the computer age exists. Since Harold Hellman’s 1976 work, *Technophobia*, more recent works have sounded the same theme, for example, *Blaming Technology* (1981) by Samuel C. Florman and *Science and Anxiety* (1981) by Jeffrey V. Mallow. More recently, lots of articles have shown that girls still avoid mathematics, as well as video games, and detail a probably sharply growing distrust of technology among various groups throughout society. September’s *Science* ’83 asked, “Are Kids Afraid to Become Scientists?”, and wondered why more than half of U.S. high school students drop out of science and math by the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Behind all the ways work and technology can be reformulated and repackaged stands their basic domination and the resultant weariness and frustration felt so universally today. A world is faltering. It is defined by absurdities and so draining that our participation must be demanded if it is to continue to exist. The “issue” of “quality of life” is spurious. If as Fourier said, “Civilization becomes more odious as it nears its end,” we at least can see not only the odium but more prospects for its end.

# fifth Estate

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