

Confronting the Enemy

A response on Time

John Zerzan

George Bradford (David Watson)

1983

[three_fourth padding="0 25px 0 0"]In response to "Beginning of Time, End of Time" by John Zerzan, FE #313, Summer, 1983.

A project such as ours, based as it is on our mutual desire to abolish technological civilization, capital and domination, had to eventually take up the problem of time. All of us know with a visceral vengeance the horrid role of the clock in our lives. We don't have to be convinced: we measure out our precious, limited im/mortality against the days, the hours and the minutes of captive time. So it was with great sympathy that I began John Zerzan's ambitious essay on time. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm was dampened significantly by what I think were flaws not only in the form but in the intention or trajectory of the piece.

John felt the need, it seems, to sledgehammer his readers with a deluge of ambiguous and at times downright dubious quotations in order to defend a thesis which he had already set out to prove no matter what. Bob Brubaker, in "What Time is It?" FE #313, Summer, 1983, points out a number of such problems with citations, and having had the privilege of seeing the footnotes myself, I would concur. One also gets the eerie sensation that for all its "anti-time" spirit, the article follows a strangely linear and incremental development—the whole world from the Book of Genesis and the Fall to an eschatology of the apocalyptic dissolution of time (followed by paradise)—which forces the entire human universe from prehistory onward into a procrustean apparatus built around a single element. Hence it becomes "not inconceivable," for example, that even the Bubonic Plagues of the mid-14th century were in a sense a massive, visceral reaction to the attack of modern time"! (Of course, it's obvious in this one extravagant case that a morbid time sense accompanied the plagues—evidenced by chilling protests against death in poetry and in the dances macabres. We tend to think of time when we think of death. But I plan to return to this question later.)

Perhaps we should all follow Brubaker's advice to consider the article an impressionistic survey of sorts, get the footnotes and go over for ourselves the fascinating material that Zerzan has collated. And though I fully agree with Brubaker's criticism, I would like to add my own two cents (or two minutes if you like) to the discussion. The mass of quotes and the occasional vagueness of their presentation make it impossible to respond to everything, but I should like to focus on four major areas which I think are problematic.

First of all his claim that "self-existent time" is the "first lie of social life" preceding or causing all others. Secondly, his notion of an opposition between timeless no-time and time, rather than distinguishing different forms of perception of time. Thirdly, his claims that we are presently experiencing the greatest "pressure to dissolve history and the rule of time...since the Middle Ages, [and] before that, since the Neolithic Revolution [a "time-bound" academic convention which I am beginning to question] establishing agriculture." And lastly, his perception of our prospects today to overthrow this time-centered civilization. I think that they are interconnected and that their consideration will flow best in this order.

According to a tautological introduction by John, time, like nature, “did not exist before the individual became separate from it.” Nor, one would guess, could the individual have existed either, if we are to accept this syllogism. But it is this primary alienation which constitutes “the Fall.” That “time” emerged, before “nature” or “the individual,” is nowhere demonstrated, only insisted. This Fall—beginning to appear “in the shape of time,” is followed by “many of tens of thousands of years of resistance” before “its definitive victory, its conversion into history” can take place. He gives no clue as to what constituted this prehistoric resistance. Nor does he hint when these tens of thousands of years passed. (We could assume that he is talking about the 30,000 years prior to Mesopotamian civilization, which would mean that time emerged with some of the earliest evidences of human culture and society. In any case, the resistance, like the primary character of time, is never demonstrated, only insisted.)

Civilization As A Matrix of Domination

Later on, he implies that agriculture is to blame—at least for “formal time concepts” (which he never distinguishes from “self-existent time,” an example of the article’s vagueness), which came with the emergence of agriculture. Here he indirectly suggests that agriculture is also a possible candidate for the role of “first cause” of the Curse, even at one point mentioning foraging as a possible basis for prehistoric no-time. In any case, with the Neolithic Revolution, it is downhill all the way to state civilization, with its priests, supported by agricultural surplus, measuring time and tracing the movement of the sky.

Here John certainly focuses on something of significance, the central role of time measurement to priestly and kingly domination in the ancient megamachines. But nowhere can we see time as a first cause leading to the entirety of the nightmare. Civilization, fully emerged, is infinitely more complex. Rather than a mechanistic relationship between time and its allegedly subsequent response of “spatialization” (a term first used by Bergson, I believe, in a much different way than by Zerzan), space (territory and its conquest, the specific form of the temples, ziggurats, and cities) and time (astronomical and dynastic cycles, planting cycles) seem to be part of a matrix of domination. I would recommend Lewis Mumford’s first volume of *The Myth of the Machine, Technics and Human Development* as an excellent and insightful intuition of the rise of the “mutation” of the institution of kingship and state society; likewise Joseph Campbell’s flawed but helpful book, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, to describe that ancient state to which Zerzan refers.

As Campbell describes it, time, and conformity to a compulsive, mathematical time-obsession, are central to ancient totalitarian societies. But it is also clear that such complex systems of domination would have emerged out of more than a knowledge of time, of the timely cycles of agriculture and the movements of the stars. Conversely, time and temporal consciousness would not be enough to explain the complexities of Sumerian state religion. There is much more here! We reduce it at our own (critical) peril.

John refers in another qualification to the “regulation of time” as the predicate of civilization. I would agree—but the qualification here is crucial. After all, time didn’t create these priestly elites, though it was one of their central techniques and obsessions. Ultimately, it wasn’t the awareness of time on the part of the planters that led to their enslavement and immiseration, but their willingness to be dominated by it and by those who declared themselves (by force of arms) to be its representatives. There is a pathology at work here which is more fundamental than the emergence of the awareness of natural and astronomical styles.

(Correspondingly, not even the physical equations of an Einstein make atomic bombs inevitable. Given the enormous capacities of human “minding,” mathematical languages and intellectual discoveries such as atomic theory were in a sense inevitable. What leads to bomb building and state terror is not a concept of atomism—if so we are lost—but the willingness of mass men molded by a massified culture to obey the commands of priestly elites and create the megastructures which make such horrors possible.)

There is a difference between the regulation of time (which implies regulation of human beings within time—what would it mean to regulate “self-existent time” apart from the activities of human beings?) and consciousness of time. In fact, throughout his article, one senses (and Brubaker has aptly shown this to be so) the possibility of different forms of time—his example of the Pawnee, for whom “life had a rhythm but not a progression,” comes to

mind. (One thinks of Jorge Luis Borges' elegant description of music as that "most docile form of time"—probably a very early form, too.) And even foraging has its cycles and seasons, its best times of day.

At The Beck And Call Of Machinery

Bergson's view, that "a qualitative sense of time, of lived experience or *duree*, requires a resistance to formalized, spatialized time" (Note that it is time here which is spatialized!) is judged "limited" by John. But he never shows the limitations—his article mostly attests to the appropriateness of Bergson's contention rather than any limitations. By following such a line of reasoning, he blurs the important distinctions which lie behind the not only primitive communities and statified empires, but the unique significance of the influx of time-domination in more recent history with the emergence of clock time along with mechanization, the standardization of languages and the writing of grammars, capitalist bookkeeping, standardization and universalization of weights and measures, ship-building treatises, experimental science, the geographic explorations and conquests of early modernity.

Even under ancient state societies, we can assume that except in the most extreme cases (such as the Aztecs) time regulation, like mega-technics and the state (all part of the same phenomenon) represented a relatively minor, sporadic (though at times catastrophic) element in the life of most people. But what began with this modern rise of mechanized, economic time domination is a development in which abstract, regulated time comes to penetrate every aspect of life. Now nearly everyone wears a wristwatch and lives by the clock. Soon clocks will be implanted directly into the brain along with microcomputers and the process will be complete. Vernacular, seasonal, agricultural, cyclic time has given way to linear, imperial, mechanized, totalitarian state time, economic time (time is money). Natural cycles have been burst by the technological, time-centered, power-centered universe of capital.

The distinction between the two forms of time is succinctly expressed by Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society*. Before the advent of the public clock tower, he writes, "time had been measured by life's needs and events...the time man guided himself by corresponded to nature's time; it was material and concrete. It became abstract...when it was divided into hours, minutes and seconds. Little by little this mechanical kind of time, with its knife-edge divisions, penetrated, along with machinery, into human life." After the appearance of private clocks, "life itself was measured by the machine; its organic functions obeyed the mechanical. Eating, working and sleeping were at the beck and call of machinery. Time, which had been the measure of organic sequences, was broken and dissociated."

John refuses to admit such a distinction, attempting rather to speculate on the existence of a prior, non-alienated "no-time." Though he attempts to plumb the bottomless "well of the past" in his search, he fails to produce a single, known human society which experiences this no-time, pointed to only what he claims are its vestiges—all examples of a primitive, vernacular, organic time—in the Tiv, Nuer and Hopi. These peoples, too, have experienced this gradual Fall from a timeless paradise. His no-time is presently nowhere.

Nevertheless, there is something very provocative in his thesis. I think that he has intuited what many of these primitive societies recognize in their myths and rituals—the existence of a previous epoch of timeless, animal oneness with nature. It is certainly worth looking at this through the perspective of the primitive people who are the least removed from it, and here Campbell's book provides just such a perspective.

"In a mythologically oriented primitive society," he writes, "every aspect of life and the world is linked organically to the pivotal insight rendered in the mythology and ritual of [the gods]. Those pre-sexual, pre-mortal ancestral beings of the mythological narrative lived the idyll of the beginning, an age when all things were innocent of the destiny of life in time. But there occurred in that age an event, the 'mythological event' par excellence, which brought to an end its timeless way of being and effected a transformation of all things. Whereupon, death and sex came into the world as the basic correlates of temporality." In this timeless world—Eden in the linear, historical time-bound Judeo-Christian tradition; the *alcheringa* or "dream-time" of the Australian aboriginal Aranda—"there was neither birth nor death but a dreamlike state of essentially timeless being."

Myth of an Original No-time in Primitive Societies

The myths of many, if not all, primitive peoples, refer to this original realm of no-time, a separate, remote realm which is also a continual presence alongside the temporal, birth-and-death-bound existence of social life. But since mortality is an inescapable fact of biological existence, this myth must be considered a metaphor. Could the dream-time, as Lewis Mumford has suggested with a different emphasis, be a reference to an actual period of human development—a pre-human and pre-mythological experience before the emergence of a consciousness of death and the most fundamental temporal cycles of life?

Campbell writes that such myths “belong rather to the world of the planters than to the shamanistically dominated hunting sphere.” But consciousness of death—and hence of time—must have been present in the ritual burials (which also imply a developed, mythological mind) of *Homo neanderthalensis*, who dates as early as 200,000–75,000 B.C. To discuss a long human epoch characterized by no-time previous to this is to create a creature who never existed and to hearken back to a pre-human, pre-conscious form of life. The realization of death, the early awareness of the cycles of woman’s menstruation and the changing of the moon, of animal mating seasons, of taking refuge at nightfall from predatory animals, of the rhythms of music and dance, all come within, or make up elements of the time-consciousness which emerges along with what we consider to be the human being and human society.

The primitive peoples haven’t imagined such a pre-human existence. They seem to be aware of its reality, translating a “genetic memory” so to speak, of this pre-human life. The gradual fall into time to which John refers is perhaps the gradual birth of human self-consciousness and culture. For the primitive mentality, the memory of that long epoch beforehand remains a living presence. And why shouldn’t it be? We recapitulate our entire evolutionary development from one cell to a fully aware human being in the process of gestation and birth. The salt in our blood has been considered a vestige of our origins in the sea. The myth of the no-time is perhaps a metaphor representing this reality, an innate recognition not only of our one-celled origins, before “birth” and “death,” before human “minding” and the recognition of our uniqueness and specificity before the universe. It is at the same time, correspondingly, a memory of the womb.

Hence it is rather significant that John also points to the earliest stages of infancy as an indication of no-time. In that sphere, there is no conflict, no trauma, no separation; the womb is a microcosm of the universe of our pre-human animalhood, unalienated and unmediated nature. But as alienation begins in John’s view in early infancy for the child, it seems inevitable that the same “mythological event” of separation will take place in the early emergence of human consciousness. For the primitive, nature issues from a womb, the great Mother. As Campbell observes,

“The state of the child in the womb is one of bliss, actionless bliss, and this state may be compared to the beatitude visualized as paradise. In the womb, the child is unaware of the alternation of night and day, or of any of the images of temporality. It should not be surprising, therefore, if the metaphors used to represent eternity suggest, to those trained in the symbolism of the infantile unconsciousness, retreat to the womb.”

But separation becomes a precondition for growth, for knowledge. The individual, now separated from nature, develops an ambivalent relationship to her. The earliest traumas are presented here. Mother, no longer a blissful total environment, becomes alternately a protectress and a threat. Separation from the breast begins to take the “shape of time.” So it is even more interesting that mother goddesses take the form of this protectress/threat. “The Hindu mother-goddess Kali,” Campbell notes, a variant of a widely diffused archetypal cannibal-mother, and who as the “Black One” is the personification of “all-consuming time,” “is represented with her long tongue lolling to lick up the lives and blood of her children. She is the very pattern of the sow that eats her farrow, the cannibal ogress: life itself, the universe, which sends forth beings only to consume them.” She is the goddess of food and abundance, birth and fecundity, yet death, too, the terror of time—a duality which reflects not an oppressive alienation, but the human condition. I have always enjoyed the FE’s (only partially) tongue-in-cheek, provocative cry, “Back to the Stone Age!” But to try to supersede the boundaries of this life-death duality, this consciousness which realizes its own subjectivity, with all of its conflicts and limitations, this consciousness of selfhood before a marvelous and terrible universe, reflects a desire also to return to the womb. Understandable in its attractiveness (hence the myths), but impossible.

Primitive peoples, through rituals and myth, reproduce the no-time as a living reality. By recognizing “this dual mystery, wherein the timeless and the temporal are the same,” they neither suppress existence within organic time nor the dream-time, “the realm that is seen again in dream and shown forth in the rites.” Because primitives live in cyclic, organic time, and because they can revive this timelessness in moments of ceremony and ecstasy, they can live more in the immediate present, to fully experience their world. They know, like the zen devotee, to eat when they are hungry and sleep when they are tired. But they also engage in purposeful, planned, temporal activities. An example of such zen-like, duality is to be found, among other human activities, in gardening, which combines the sensuous pleasure of the immediate moment with an understanding that what takes place today will bear fruit in the future.

Human life if it is to maintain continuity, cannot be timeless, with out a past and a future, and ecstasy by definition cannot exist except in contrast to the rather more mundane activities of the rest of life. Actually, it is modern capitalism, with its fetishized promise of instant gratification, eternal youth, and soma-induced paradise, which wrecks such duality and therefore ecstasy. Or, rather, it colonizes, counterfeits true ecstasy in its technical hubris against nature. Freedom demands that the duality and its ambivalence not be suppressed, but maintained. To desire to return to pre-human existence is to abandon freedom and to abandon our very human nature.

Just as the first two points complemented and flowed into one another, the last two are also interconnected. John’s estimation of the character of the present day is linked to his view of our prospects. He believes that since the late Middle Ages there has never been such a strong wave of resistance against time as there is today. What is his evidence? He points to the “articulation” of the anti-time impulse in the “quickening movement” before World War I, for example, and likewise to the acceleration of time and the pace of modernity in our own period. The use of psychedelic drugs, such situationist slogans as “Quick!” on the walls of Paris in 1968, and an increasingly widespread anxiety and desperation on the part of people, and their inability to accept the ideology of the Glorious Future, in the face of our sense of acceleration towards the abyss are also evidence.

Desperation Is Only a Sign of Crisis

I think that he confuses the crisis with what he perceives as its imminent resolution, something he has done elsewhere. In his essay, “The Promise of the ‘80s”, for example, he associated random, individual (and mob) acts of nihilism, violence and despair with the coming revolution. The fact that institutional legitimacy is in disarray was evidence enough that people were preparing to contest the rule of capital. This was also the picture he drew of late nineteenth century society, which he compared with our own period, in his article on the origins of World War I. But it is my feeling that he missed the implications of his own study: that such desperation is only a sign of crisis—posing a tremendous problem, but not its supercession by autonomous revolt. In the case of World War I, it was capital which provided the release of the pent-up violent energies and desires bursting the seams of capitalist society. A period of widespread disaffection gave way in a trumpet blast, to mass mobilization and mechanization for trench warfare and unparalleled slaughter. This avenue is no less a possibility today, except that the violence, like the level of crisis and disaffection, will be that much greater.

Capital, too, is “revolution”: capital strains against time and history, against the weight of the ages it drags in its wake. Capital, too, tends to move toward “dissolving” history. Just as John tends to confuse the signals of crisis with those of autonomous rebellion, he blurs the possibilities of a human, libertarian resolution of our alienation with that of capital’s strategy. Ironic as it may seem, the European conquests of the world were carried out by people attempting to annul time and their history: it was capital’s solution to the cultural crisis in late medieval Europe for people to “flee time,” exchanging it for the open, “empty” spaces of the colonial world. In this way they were able to begin the process all over again on a new, more death-dealing plateau. (Also, ironically, it is in this respect which John’s notion of spatialization makes perfect sense.)

It is possible that it would also be in the interests of capital to unambiguously annul time and history within the context of a “timeless,” memoryless technical universe—a utopian panopticon, the history of its crimes dissolved by computers, drugs and psychological technique. And though it is necessary to be against the process of history (which is the process of the rise and triumph of the state), it seems equally necessary for us now to maintain a certain

ambivalence towards that history as contested terrain. For history is the labyrinth in which we have become lost, and the minotaur which devours us. But it is also in a sense our only thread leading back to the entrance and our only way out. Hence, the call to “dissolve” technological civilization (consider the alchemical implications of such a phrase!) by annulling time and history is not so much wrong to people seeking a way out of the technological mire and renew community, as it is incoherent. It is a proposal to resist not only technology but even technics; not only mass society but society; not only standardized, monolithic, statified language but poetic, vernacular, convivial language; not only official history but memory; not only time domination but awareness of the cycles of life; not only alienation from nature but our uniqueness, our consciousness as human subjects, in relation to it.

And it is also erroneous, for in spite of all the resistance to history, if we could annul it, dissolve it, what would keep us from repeating the same mistakes as before? Only memory, only by facing history. We cannot afford to annul it, we must confront it—in this way bring an end to this cycle. As novelist Milan Kundera has written, “the struggle of man [and woman!] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

Civilization cannot be dissolved. If it could, what would prevent the spreading cultural and biological entropy it has set in motion (or at least aggravated to an unprecedented degree) from overwhelming us in the moment of our timeless “ecstasy”? It has to be dismantled, and that is, to our misfortune but unavoidably, a uniquely historical task. It is necessary to resist the imposition of abstract, mechanized state-time, leviathan-time, in our lives, to return time to its natural, limited place in our lives, to abolish its regime. But we have been scarred by history—and we cannot deny the scars. We cannot abolish the Fall, we carry it with us, and we cannot fantasize escaping its consequences. They, too, are a part of our universe. John said as much by quoting Goethe: “Only he who has experienced history can judge it.”

It is understandable that the desire for freedom presses not only against the constraints imposed upon us by modern civilization, but against the very limits of the human organism, against the natural conditions of life. Baudelaire’s poem “The Enemy” reflects such a protest against nature:

“Oh sorrow! Oh sorrow! Time eats my life.

And the obscure Enemy who knows our hearts

From the blood we lose grows and fortifies himself!

For Baudelaire, as for modernity, freedom is an unquenchable thirst which yearns to burst all limits. But this yearning is just as much the motor by which capital ravages the present to colonize the future, thus extirpating any possibilities for us to renew and to deepen the sources of life. Only a recognition of organic human limits can save us from the unlimited expansion of capital. By maintaining our ambivalence towards history both as the source of our agony and the possible key to our release, we may find a way to renew that duality between the eternal present of no-time and the necessity for temporal, purposeful activities to maintain human continuity. I think that it will allow us to deepen our discourse, prevent it from becoming monolithic.

There is no “first cause,” and therefore no single and unambiguous solution to the problem. No matter what, we should not let our questioning become transformed into an attempt, whether through zeal or through desperation, to impose totalizing, one-dimensional answers. Perhaps in this way we can begin truly to confront the enemy which lies within all of us as it does within our culture, and thereby encounter the concrete, practical resolution to our wanderings and renew the sources of paradise, the “dream-time.”

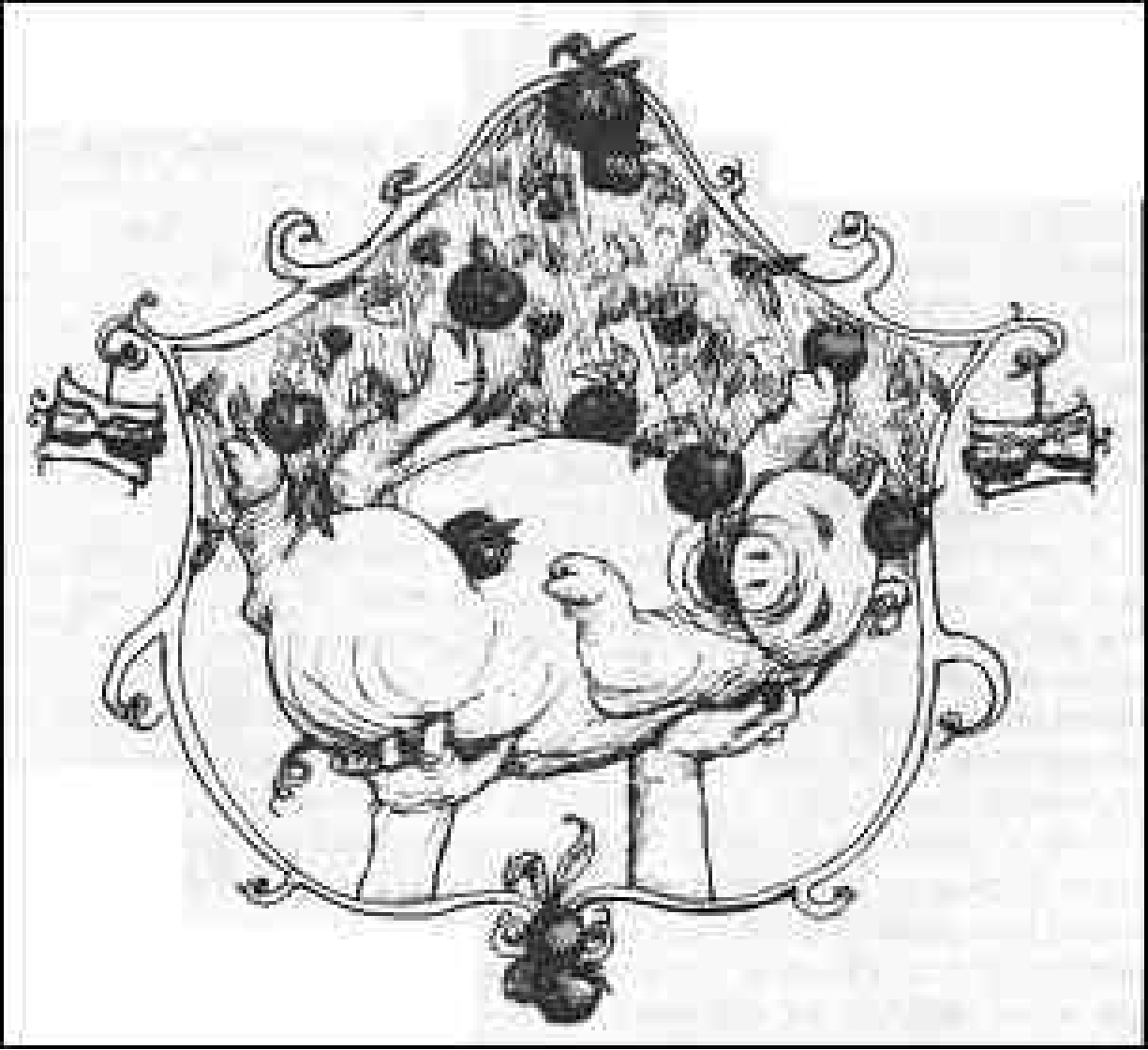
—George Bradford

Chas de Semide, Portugal

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John Zerzan replies: My conjecture/dream/hypothesis is certainly in no way definitive; I realize, for example, that no one, certainly including me, has even adequately defined objectified time. I have tried to discuss or at least imagine a world without it and to assemble a few points for discussion around its genesis. This has evoked conservative fears in some, it seems to me, and a consequent defense of time, in the shape of its projected reform.

Rather than write a long-winded defense of particulars of the essay—or of faults in the arguments against it—let’s just leave it to whatever readers to consider for themselves.[/three_fourth][one_fourth_last]



A traveler hiking through the countryside came upon a farmer who, arms outstretched, was holding a pig up to the dangling apples of an apple tree. The pig, secure and content in the farmer's hands, was munching noisily on the crispy apples.

Traveler: What are you doing?

Farmer: I'm feeding my pig some apples.

Traveler (incredulous): Don't you think it would save a lot of time if you would just climb the tree and shake some apples down?

Farmer: Save time? What's time to a pig?

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