

# Against the Totality

John Zerzan's *Against Civilization*

John Filiss

1999

a review of

*Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections*, edited by John Zerzan. Uncivilized Books, Eugene, Ore., 1999, 214 pp., \$10 (available from FE Books)

*Against Civilization* is an essay collection taking the radical perspective that the society we toil ceaselessly to maintain and reform may not be worth sustaining.

This is a good book. I wasn't sure how much I would like this volume, as I had mixed feelings about Zerzan's last anthology, *Questioning Technology*. QT suffered several failings, perhaps the most crucial one being that it was too highly structured.

The book was centered around a group of ten questions regarding technology, and several essays were then proffered to answer each question or elucidate the issues it raises. Whether or not that was the sole reason for it, QT felt too limiting in its approach.

Considering some of the great essay collections, like Adam Parfrey's *Apocalypse Culture*, I note that they tend to be more elliptical than straight forward in their direction, usually defining a new breadth to the issue at hand. *Apocalypse Culture*, for example, has very little in it regarding a literal apocalypse culture, but so much that manages to evoke a sense that time has run its course, and the world and its illusions are drawing to a close.

Much the same could be said regarding *Against Civilization*. There are 51 selections in all, from authors as diverse as William Morris, Theodore Roszak, Fourier, Ivan Illich, Marshall Sahlins, Rudolf Bahro, Thoreau, Kirkpatrick Sale, and many others. The selections are wisely kept short.

Zerzan even excerpts his own "Future Primitive" and "Agriculture" essays rather than printing them in their entirety, seeking to spark the reader's interest instead of inundating it. If covering its topic with short excerpts and essays seems like a good method for introducing these ideas, the book is not without value for those of us who have been thinking on these topics for some time.

I was unfamiliar with works like Arnold DeVries's *Primitive Man and His Food* and Hoxie Neale Fairchild's *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, and I suspect virtually everyone will encounter authors they hadn't known, or at least haven't read.

The formatting, which juxtaposes more theoretical essays with short, fun bits like Lynn Clive's "Birds Combat Civilization," first published in the *Fifth Estate* [FE #319, Winter, 1985], is something every reader will enjoy. Incidentally, the *Fifth Estate*'s T. Fulano and his "Civilization Is Like a Jetliner" [FE #314, Fall 1983] is the only piece which made both *Questioning Technology* and *Against Civilization*.

Actually, developing reader interest through breadth and brevity is the book's leitmotif. Even the handful of pieces I felt were a bit weak, such as Frederic Jameson's verbose *The Seeds of Time*, serve a purpose when viewed from this perspective. Jameson's porno-influenced piece might serve as a doorway for those at home with Baudrillard, while being short enough to be unobtrusive for the rest of us.

It is the standout pieces that you'll remember, though. For me, that included Paul Shepard's *Nature and Madness*, the excerpt from Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* and especially the "Toy Shop" excerpt from Theodore Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Just listen to a part of this exquisite piece:

"Hebbel, in a surprising entry in his diary, asks what takes away 'life's magic in later years.' It is because in all the brightly-coloured contorted marionettes, we see the revolving cylinder that sets them in motion, and because for this very reason the captivating variety of life is reduced to wooden monotony. A child seeing the tightrope-walkers singing, the pipes playing, the girls fetching water, the coachmen driving, thinks all this is happening for the joy of doing so; he can't imagine that these people also have to eat and drink, go to bed and get up again. We, however, know what is at stake. Namely, earning a living, which commandeers all these activities as mere means, reduces them to interchangeable, abstract labor-time. The quality of things ceases to be their essence and becomes the accidental appearance of their value."

*Against Civilization* is a book that will hopefully find the audience it deserves.

# fifth Estate

John Filiss  
Against the Totality  
John Zerzan's *Against Civilization*  
1999

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/353-summer-1999/against-the-totality>  
Fifth Estate #353, Summer, 1999

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**