

# Running on Emptiness

Book review

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2003

a review of

*Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization*, By John Zerzan, Feral House, Los Angeles, 2002, 214 pp., \$12

John Zerzan hardly needs an introduction here; few modern anarchist writers are as well-known, controversial, and divisive. Zerzan is the founder and leading philosopher of what he calls anarcho-primitivism.

What separates anarcho-primitivist ideas from those of classical anarchism is that they are based more on a critique of civilization, representation, and interpretation than on a critique of power. A recent collection of his essays, *Running on Emptiness*, serves as a good introduction to his ideas.

Zerzan believes that all of the ills of modern society originate in humanity's adoption of symbolic thought, leading, he and others postulate, to language, division of labor, agriculture, animal domestication, and eventually, to the gamut of problems the world faces today.

The answer, then, is to abolish all forms of technology, up to and including the use of language, number, and time. Activists and writers who use a different conceptual framework, or those who address specific issues such as United States foreign policy are missing the point, according to Zerzan.

It is on this basis that Zerzan launches his bitter attacks on other anarchist writers. In two essays, "Who is Noam Chomsky" and "Hakim Bey, Postmodern 'Anarchist,'" those who deviate from Zerzan's line of thinking are criticized for being insufficiently radical.

A John Zerzan drinking game: a shot each time he accuses another writer of being "liberal," "reformist," or "post-modern."

This is the single biggest problem with Zerzan's writing, including his presence in the letters sections of several anarchist publications. His style is combative, polemical and intolerant, recalling the unproductive infighting that has reduced socialism to its current state.

He slams periodicals like the *Fifth Estate* for hosting open-minded discussions between different tendencies within the modern anarchist movement. While passionate debate is healthy, doctrinaire squabbling serves only to take energy away from realizing anarchism's core principles of anti-authoritarianism and self-organization.

Zerzan barely addresses the question of how anarcho-primitivism could be applied on a large scale. To abolish technology universally requires the use of coercion. This is where Zerzan most needs the critique of power and authority that is lacking from his work: after all, it is worth remembering that several fascist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were based in part on the idea of the return to simpler times. If Zerzan wants the entire population of the world to voluntarily embrace anarcho-primitivism, he needs to find more convincing arguments.

As with many collections of essays, there is some degree of redundancy in *Running on Emptiness*. After a few pieces, those with shorter attention spans may be tempted to give up.

There are a few unexpected gems, though. The most accessible piece in the book is a talk with writer Derrick Jensen, another writer who locates the origins of authority and exploitation early in our history and deep in our

culture. The more agreeable Jensen, who has a gift for articulating anarcho-primitivist ideas in personal terms, draws out Zerzan's best qualities.

There is also an unexpected piece of art criticism: despite being a one-sided endorsement of the abstract expressionists, it contains flashes of enthusiastic scholarship and sheds light on Zerzan's thinking on representation. In the last essay in the book, Zerzan draws an explicit connection between the failure of liberal democracy (representation in the political sphere) and symbolic thought (representation in the cognitive sphere).

As he makes clear in his praise for abstract expressionist painters, he feels that it is the standing in of one thing for another—a picture of a bird standing in for a real bird, elected officials standing in for “the people”—that is the root cause of civilization's malaise. These ideas in and of themselves are provocative and worthy of discussion.

Arguing seems natural to us: as anarchists, we have all chosen to be at odds with many of the unquestioned principles of our civilization.

However, at least within the confines of the anarchist movement, we still have a choice: we can either assert our beliefs as forcefully as possible, shouting down those who disagree, or we can sit down and start listening to each other.

Unfortunately, John Zerzan directs his talents against many of those with whom he has the most in common. Reading *Running on Emptiness*, one is struck by how much we could gain if he finally decided to join the conversation.

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