

Examining Zerzan

Excerpts from *Fifth Estate* history

Fifth Estate Collective
John Zerzan
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Much of primitivist theorist John Zerzan's early work appeared in the *Fifth Estate*. His Cassandra-like predictions of imminent collapse of modern society began in 1976 with his FE article, "The Decline and Fall of Everything"—a compendium of statistics of social dislocation.

With the FE, he explained the human dilemma as rooted in the institutions of civilization itself. He indicted not only agriculture, but also music, art, numbers, and even language itself as being the agents of human alienation. His provocative and often maddening articles that appeared in these pages were always answered by counter-critiques from our staff and led to feisty exchanges of letters. Eventually, we parted company with him.

Zerzan subsequently condemned the *Fifth Estate* as having "lost its radical edge." In recent years, he has gained international notoriety (his photo appearing in Time magazine alongside images of Emma Goldman and the Unabomber). What follows is a taste of his early prose and some of our later comments on his work.

The Decline and Fall of Everything

by John and Paula Zerzan

(excerpted from **FIFTH ESTATE #268, January, 1976**, Vol. 11, No. 4, page 1)

The landscape of capitalism is a global one, existing everywhere with only minor variations. But this universal reign of the paycheck and the price-tag is approaching a state of crisis, becoming noticeable to all but those whose idea of politics excludes everyday reality. Naturally enough, this crisis of the spirit, this nearing collapse of daily routine, is reaching its most acute forms thus far in America, capital's most advanced arena. Feelings of cynicism, powerlessness, and desperate boredom no longer allow easy distraction; we know that an upside-down world forces us to remain onlookers in our own lives, and the social fact of this realization is fast sending the prevailing values to ashes. A break-up of the deepest sort is nearing because more and more people refuse to tolerate merely surviving. Destruction and even self-destruction are preferred to the impossibility of living. [Advertisers] can't help but know what everyone wants: freedom, authenticity, adventure; and so they must attempt to offer more and more—in terms of what can only be seen as less and less. The need for total revolution becomes clearer and clearer, and a seemingly unavoidable nihilism is advancing as its prelude.

Introduction to Zerzan on Agriculture

by E. B. Maple

(excerpted from FE 329 Summer 1988)

Almost all John Zerzan's essays feature accompanying introductions in which the word most frequently used to describe his method and conclusions is "provocative." Some may think this only an ugly little term meant to distance a publication from the wild assertions that John so often makes in his writings ("wild," by the way, is a word which I know he will not take as a pejorative). Realistically though, provocative accurately describes what is the common reaction to reading a Zerzan article—you are provoked, to anger or to thought.

Anger, because he states everything with such a sense of certitude even when it does not seem entirely plausible to do so, e.g., liberation is impossible without the dissolution of agriculture, language is the original separation, etc. Indeed, a web of these certainties have come to form a Chinese puzzle foundation for his view of alienation and domination, leaving his partisans and detractors arguing about how well it all hangs together.

Comments on John Zerzan's Critique of Agriculture

by Bob Brubaker, Mishima, Japan

(excerpted from FE #330 Winter 1988–89)

John Zerzan's essay, "Agriculture: Essence of Civilization," appeared in the Summer 1988 FE. It is also part of a collection of John's essays entitled Elements of Refusal.

Is agriculture the ultimate source of alienation? John Zerzan answers this question with an emphatic "yes" (see "Agriculture, Essence of Civilization," Summer 1988 FE.) Arguing that agriculture is "the embodiment and generator of separated life," he concludes that "liberation is impossible without its dissolution."

If true, John's allegations would have far-reaching implications for the radical ecology movement. Ecological theory would have to be substantially revised, and the long-sought goal of creating agriculture-based eco-communities abandoned.

In alleging that agricultural societies "inevitably ruin their environments," John ignores one of the most important aspects of the symbolic structure of primitive society. John posits a direct link between agricultural settlements, the rise of private property, the growth of cities, and the rise of civilization—a continuous development which resulted in widespread ecological destruction in the regions where the first civilizations arose.

But this scenario completely ignores the fact that most tribal cultures were stable, not expansionist in nature, and this fact bears a direct relationship to their impact on the environment. Most tribal societies didn't exterminate their neighbors, enslave whole populations, or seize their territory.

Indeed, our immediate survival—in a world worth living in—if not our survival as a species, depends on finding and implementing ecologically viable forms of agriculture that can serve as a basis for a liberatory society. The evidence of primitive society suggests that such an agriculture is possible, if only we can find our way back to nature.

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