

Endgame

Book review

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2007

a review of

Endgame, Volume I: *The Problem of Civilization*, Volume 2: *Resistance* by Derrick Jensen. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006

“Do not listen to me.”

—Derrick Jensen, *Endgame*

Derek Jensen, author of *A Language Older Than Words* and *The Culture of Make Believe*, has become a best-selling author and a popular lecturer at conferences and campuses. If mainstream environmentalists would reform industrial civilization through sustainable practices, Derrick Jensen wants to destroy it by any means necessary. No pacifist with illusions about transforming civilization into a wild, primal culture through love and nonviolence, he fantasizes about blowing up dams. He’s sticking it to the man to save the salmon. Jensen wants a wild world, and he demands doing “whatever it takes to get there.”

Reading his words about the salmon over again, I knew I’d heard this slogan before. A version of this quote appeared on the cover of the Summer 2004 *Fifth Estate*—our “Reconsidering Primitivism” issue. There, in an introduction to Jensen’s essay (which ended up being a draft of a sliver of Jensen’s mammoth new book), I praised his writings as “seamless narrative swords drawn to skewer the social lie.” Based on his earlier work and my earlier endorsement, one might expect more tribute for this latest tome. But while I agree with many ideas within it, *Endgame* is a bloated book that promises way more than it can deliver.

Early on, Jensen introduces a book about a “shift in strategy and tactics.” In addition to prefacing both volumes with twenty “premises” which act as both talking points and a very general outline, he pledges “to examine the morality and feasibility of intentionally taking down not just dams but all of civilization.” By the end of the book, he’s offered more morality than I can usually stomach but dodges feasibility entirely, decrying the presumption of getting specific. This denial of detail is his prerogative, of course; but to me, terms like “strategy and tactics” imply some level of specificity.

As long as the books are, readers won’t get bored. Jensen’s a great storyteller, and his anecdotal, memoir-like style make Jensen a very readable and compelling writer. However, these strengths betray his mission. While the 900 pages prickle readers with an ethical thicket of Jensen’s logical gymnastics bent on debunking dogmatic pacifism and defending his ideas about counterviolence (a term borrowed from black liberation writer Franz Fanon), the text fails to deliver any actual vision of strategy or version of tactics—unless we count loosely organized anecdotal evidence, long quotes from his sources, and short, repetitive prose poems about how “we are going to win.”

If we’re looking for current theory about the basic flaws with civilization and the movements to destroy it, John Zerzan’s recently reissued anthology *Against Civilization* might be a better place to start. And *Green Anarchy*, the

journal Zerzan helps edit, never ceases to impress with its creative and critical depth, even as it occasionally infuriates with its arrogant attitude. Juxtaposing Jensen's storytelling style with the problem of civilization, I expected something like *Green Anarchy Lite*. But what we end up with is worse.

In an interview with the online journal CounterPunch, Jensen describes his audience for *Endgame* as "people who already recognize how bad this culture is." How would he describe his relationship to that audience? "I want to push them to become more radical." It's in this pushing that Jensen, in fact, gets pushy. He sinks into a subtle yet insidious pattern of conservative and fundamentalist thinking.

To the problem of civilization and how to oppose it, Jensen repeatedly applies the logic of victimization, recovery, and abuse. In Jensen's formula, civilization is the rapist, and life itself is the victim. To be against rape is to be against civilization. And like the rapist, the civilized cannot be taught or treated, redeemed or forgiven—only stopped. To disagree with Jensen about this logic is to be obscene, to advocate slavery, to support rapists.

While Jensen scolds pacifists for their addiction to moral absolutes, that doesn't stop him from throwing out a few of his own. His summary goes like this: "Defensive rights always trump offensive rights. My right to freedom always trumps your right to exploit me, and if you do try to exploit me, I have the right to stop you, even at some expense to you."

However, this logic cannot be extended and extrapolated into infinity as Jensen tries to do, even against his own better insights. Of course, some kind of self-defense makes complete sense—even from a pacifist point of view. It's our first task to prevent harm to the victim, even at the risk of harming the aggressor. And there are many layers of retreat and restraint shy of killing.

In terms of complicity with civilization, all too often, the assailant is also the victim. In fact, at this time—especially for those of us living in North America—we are all simultaneously the injurer and the injured party. But as anti-authoritarians, we desire neither role. Doesn't anarchy envision a world where we are neither attacker nor attacked, neither oppressor nor oppressed?

To describe the common predicament of the modern world, Jensen uses absolute phrases like "irredeemable," "insane," and "death urge." If something is so bad and basically evil at its base, this could be described as its essential nature. For Jensen, the fundamental evil that precedes all evil is civilization, and if you are not actively destroying it, you're probably benefiting from it. In logic, this could be called the fallacy of first cause, generously seasoned with the either-or fallacy. How is this conservative? It's Jensen's equivalent of "original sin."

Either you agree with Jensen—or you are a pathological abuser. Since all of Jensen's readers—and Jensen himself—participate in and benefit from this civilization in some manner, the distinction between those exploiters with an insane and irredeemable death urge and the victims of this intrinsically rotten system can get more than a little fuzzy.

For most of the 900 pages, Jensen provides painful details to support his claims about how bad civilization is, and since most readers are already sympathetic, as long as we keep civilization in the realm of an abstraction, we're ready to cheer right along. But in an emphatic fashion that implores readers to take action against civilization, he urges more than an abstract and alienated sense of horror and foreboding. He advocates any and all kinds of fighting, battles, warfare, counterviolence, stopping the rapists, and killing the exploiters. And he anticipates every pacifist counterargument before it's made.

How will Jensen know that his targets are legitimate? "I would, for example, kill someone who attempted to kill those I love, and I would not kill someone who tried to cut me off on the interstate. It is my joy, responsibility, and honor as a sentient being to make those distinctions, and I pity those who do not consider themselves worthy or capable of making them themselves, and who must rely on slogans instead to guide their actions."

Since civilization as a system is intent on killing everything we love, Jensen clearly just about advocates the violent overthrow of the entire apparatus.

While uncertain about his own strategy and tactics, he's too quick to critique the strategy and tactics of others. He calls some of the earth defenders who get caught "stupid," before offering his own tedious litany of all the "stupid" things they shouldn't do. Has he re-thought that section since the latest wave of anti-green indictments and scare tactics? I can't speak for all the reviewers who have uncritically recommended this book, but I would never even remotely imply that the risk-taking rebels, currently facing long prison sentences, who have put their lives on the line for the earth, are "stupid."

If that weren't bad enough, though, late in the book Jensen admits that he is unprepared to walk his own talk. He says he's scared. He doesn't want to go to jail. He doesn't want to get killed. Plus, Derrick Jensen's a writer, and other people actually like making bombs. I wish I were making this part up, but I reread this section several times.

But here's the lowdown: Jensen writes books instead of doing what he advocates in those books because, "I feel like the work I'm doing now is important, and I don't see anyone else doing it. I don't see enough people explicitly calling for us to bring down civilization and making the sorts of comprehensive and comprehensible analyses I try to do."

As a person who identifies as a writer, I've never felt that role precluded me from taking action on the things I believe in strongly. My advocacy for nonviolent approaches comes from the fact these are the only kind of tactics I've ever engaged in myself. Jensen, on the other hand, passes out rhetorical matches and gasoline to take down civilization by any and all means, and then says bluntly that he's not going to do any of the dirty work himself — because he believes his role as a writer is too valuable.

At this point, those still looking for the 21st century version of the Earth First! classic Ecodefense might wonder what to do next. Don't ask Jensen, who says: "If you want to know what to do, go to the nearest river, the nearest mountain, the nearest native tree, the nearest native soil, and ask it what to do."

Coming towards his conclusion, this mythopoetic liturgy is a copout. I'm all about talking with and listening to the plants and animals, the land and water; it's something I do regularly, and Jensen's discussions about these kinds of conversations provided some gems in *Language Older Than Words*. However, asking the trees and weeds around Pumpkin Hollow about strategy and tactics for taking down civilization is something I could have done instead of reading this book. And inevitably, their answers would be filtered through my interpretation and ideology. The weeds might tell me to take up foraging for berries to smash the state, while the trees might tell my neighbor to sharpen his shotgun skills.

All this listening to the land stuff certainly falls into the category of what I'd call "magical thinking"—something that as a pagan I am quite comfortable with. However, one of Jensen's primary objectives in this book is to prove the utter uselessness of magical thinking, as he does so well when stating that neither Jesus nor the Great Mother, neither the Easter Bunny nor Santa Claus "can get us out of this mess."

Jensen lectures readers for pages and pages with painstakingly rational rebuttals to dismiss prayer, love, visualization, and any other pacifist tactic as utterly naive and inadequate for the task at hand.

So imagine my bewilderment when, towards the end of the encyclopedic rant, Jensen argues that civilization will fall thanks to a "series of miracles." As a pagan with strong pacifist leanings, I'll take a series of miracles over militancy and martyrdom any day. But coming from Jensen in a book about the moral imperative of counterviolence, I frankly don't buy it.

Derrick Jensen reneges on his own stated purpose and asks his readers not to listen to him and to listen to their landbases instead. This, at least, is a sentiment on which Jensen and I can agree.

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