

Transhumanism vs. Primitivism

Zoltan Istvan & John Zerzan

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“Come and hear the views of two thinkers who arguably have defined the two polar opposite views on the effects of technology” blared the invitation to a November 15 debate between Transhumanist Zoltan Istvan and Anarcho-Primitivist John Zerzan at California’s Stanford University.

Grimacing at the clash-of-the-titans-esque rhetoric that epitomized the debaters, I nonetheless made my way eagerly to the college, just south of San Francisco, to watch the spectacle unfold.



Zoltan Istvan & John Zerzan, Stanford debate, 2014
(photo: Kourosh Afrashteh/Project Prometheus)

As part of the audience “in the very back, who some suggested were black bloc participants,” as Istvan wrote in a post-debate Huffington Post, evincing a palpable fear of anarchists that, by his own admission, had him considering or perhaps actually wearing a bullet-proof vest to the debate.

I should reveal to readers that Zerzan’s *Elements of Refusal* had a tremendous influence on me and remains one of my most recommended books. That being said, Zerzan and I have areas of disagreement, and I do not consider myself an uncritical loyalist.

The ideology of Transhumanism has diverse adherents and interpretations, but most share an extremely optimistic view of history as an objective increase in human knowledge, material wealth, and technological faculty. Extrapolating forward, they argue we can soon expect to transcend our humanity through an amalgamation of bionic organs, genetic manipulation, and total interface with machines, up to and including the

complete shedding of the human body.

Istvan, who recently announced his candidacy for the U.S. presidency in 2016, contrasted an unacknowledged Hobbesian portrait of primitive life as dirty, unpleasant, sickly, and ignorant with a view evoking a kind of Ayn Randian humanism. To Istvan, the individual manifesting their power through applied rationalism and technology seemed a self-evident virtue exemplified by, in his words, “shoot [ing] our Tweets off to our friends,” the “8,000 planes in the sky,” and the conquest of Nature, with which, he asserted, humans are “in complete conflict.”

Zerzan encapsulated his case by labeling Transhumanism “an unhealthy fantasy.” He continued with the Anarcho-Primitivist mainstay that it is relatively uncontroversial in modern anthropology that peoples living in gatherer-hunter band society were and are prevaillingly pacific, egalitarian, robust, and non-patriarchal.

He lamented the death of community via mass society and emphasized the inability of mainstream culture to offer any real critique of psychosocial phenomenon such as mass shootings, arguing its inability lay in the fact that to do so would betray the alienation engendered by this culture.

Unfortunately, the structure of the debate entailed obvious restrictions in the breadth and depth of dialogue. The opponents were only allowed opening remarks, a rebuttal, and a conclusion, with neither having the opportunity to question one another nor to give a midway summary speech. One attendee remarked in the immediate aftermath, "I was hoping for more of a bloodbath!"

At times, the competitors were, as Zerzan acknowledged, "shooting past each other." Though both referred to Nature numerous times, for instance, exactly what was meant by that bleached term and what that definition's implications were vis-a-vis a human/nature dichotomy or human/nonhuman relationships were left mostly unspoken. When Zerzan articulated the possibility that Technopositivism is replacing political ideologies as an abstract authority, the point was left unaddressed and lost in the debate except for some loosely related statements by Istvan later about the importance of democratic controls on the development of artificial intelligence.

Still, points of conflict were present. Subjectivity was featured prominently in both speakers' initial opening speeches. Istvan argued initially that technopositivism was "better for our happiness [and] spirit." Later, though, he conceded that Anarcho-Primitivists had a better case when it came to happiness and community, though he then denied the importance of happiness, reducing it to "just a bunch of neurons firing" and insisting it, along with mass shootings, "will be overcome" by future technology.

Istvan's statements pithily express the archetypal perspective of consciousness held by most adherents of the related tendencies of Transhumanism and artificial intelligence. It is a computational and materialistic view of the mind, one that underlies an interesting paradox.

On the one hand, you have the Transhumanist understatement if not outright denial of subjectivity; the argument that consciousness, or subjective phenomenological experience, is not at all mysterious, but instead explicable entirely in material terms. Where its existence is acknowledged, its importance is dismissed.

At its zenith, one ends up in the borderline Behaviorist perspectives of the likes of philosopher of science Daniel Dennett, saying "Consciousness is a bunch of tricks in the brain." Unintentionally completing his statement is artificial intelligence pioneer, Marvin Minsky: "When you know how the magic trick works, then the sense of wonder goes away." Such voracious reductionism denies the very existence of the qualitative, in spite of serious arguments to the contrary among their peers. With the death of the qualitative comes the triumph of the quantitative with its attendant mutilation of subjective life.

Accompanying this death of the subject is a forfeiture of personal agency. Some Transhumanists express this with a salivating eagerness, awaiting the realization. Others, oddly, express mild to severe reservations about the possibility of catastrophe or genocide, but nonetheless maintain that it is unstoppable. Humanity, it would seem, is a mere passive pawn in the progress of the Machine.

When life is entirely measurable and divisible, it becomes impossible not to conceptualize it as an ever diminishing stack of uniform moments—yawning death steadily devouring our stack. And, there we find the second half of the Transhumanist paradox: the allergy to death.

In his *Three Laws of Transhumanism*, Istvan expresses brazenly that one's first priority ought to be the avoidance of death, which he has called the "most important goal" of his philosophy. This drive manifests itself in such absurdities as his proposed "Jethro Knights Life Extension tax." The plan calls for every adult human being on the planet to donate one percent of their personal net worth towards life extension science—"the world can conquer death in about a decade's time if enough resources are put towards it," according to Istvan.

Even more extreme is his proposition that we might all achieve immortality by uploading our minds to become virtual avatars, which, in light of persuasive arguments that consciousness is not reducible to computation, seems a death urge. Somehow, we must both deny that life is truly lived and felt even as we consider its unlived permanence of the utmost importance.

It is difficult not to make psychological inferences when confronted with such feverishness—is Transhumanism a case study in Terror Management Theory, the anxiety caused by one's knowledge of mortality?

As life becomes more drained and mediated, and as the threat of death abounds in a toxic and violent culture, many are clinging more and more fiercely to ideology. Indeed, Istvan acknowledges that his interest in Transhu-

manism accelerated when he had a near-death experience of stepping on a landmine. He has also stated that, were he able, he would monitor his daughters with drones and implants in order to protect them from death and injury.

With such considerations, Transhumanism seems the ideology of Progress's ultimate realization. The qualitative implications of Progress are manifold: the inadequacy of the human being as such, the loss of immediate presence, and the Productionist ethos that demands sacrifice now for future gain.

Whereas, Classical Greece demanded the enslavement of some so that others might engage in contemplative life for intellectual progress and the modern society condones ecocide for the sake of raising the Commodity's standard, Transhumanism would throw the whole world on the pyre, in the ultimate abstracted Progress that seems to envision an absolution for the human race in the form of the resurrection of a quasi-deific entity: a greater-than-human intelligence that they envision ushering in a new era.

While it is likely that much of the debate's audience was polarized, its subsequent touting in the Huffington Post, courtesy of Istvan, undoubtedly allowed post-left anarchy a blip of recognition in the mainstream in a way that did nothing to dilute the iconoclasm of its content. In the post-left anarchist's eternal tension between being averse to proselytizing and propagandizing while still seeing a need to circulate their ideas, should public debates such as this one be seen as a viable tactic, or is such an event yet another case of anarchists uselessly trying to make the media work for us?

Certainly, the debate's attendance and Istvan's popularity shows that the Transhumanists have managed to make the media work quite well for them.

An incredible, and thoroughly sad and pathetic ideology has taken hold largely due to the fear of death, reification of time, and a fevered adherence to the myth of Progress, a logical extension of the Enlightenment values that Zerzan critiqued in his "Time and its Discontents."

"the modern idea of progress, closely related to that of unbounded linear time, [...expresses] itself in [Descartes'] famous invitation that we become 'masters and possessors of nature: [...] Time is now the grand ruler, answering to no one, influenced by nothing, completely independent of the environment: the model of unassailable authority and perfect guarantor of unchanging alienation."

Bellamy is one of the co-hosts and co-creators of West Oakland's Free Radical Radio, a green anarchist podcast available at freeradicalradio.net. FRR advances an anti-civilization critique informed, variously and chaotically, by anarcho-primitivism, egoism, nihilism, permaculture, and science fiction.

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