

Hope Among the Ruins

John Zerzan's new collection of essays on civilization

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2016

a review of

Why Hope? The Stand Against Civilization by John Zerzan; introduction by Lang Gore. Feral House, 2015, 136 pp.

John Zerzan's latest book, *Why Hope? The Stand Against Civilization*, continues his ongoing critique of civilization and its consequences. The collection of essays—many of which originally appeared in *Fifth Estate* and other anarchist publications during the past few years—explore familiar topics: the origins of civilization, the techno-culture, industrialism, the Left, and collapse.

Despite its relatively slim size, *Why Hope?* covers a lot of ground. It's divided into three sections containing multiple essays each.

The "Origins" essays explore the origins of civilization, "Situations" looks at the contemporary era, and "Inspirations" focuses on non-humans and the natural world.

Among the standouts are "Numb and Number," which originally appeared in these pages, where the author does an excellent job of exploring how numbers and mathematics work to quantify the natural world. He further builds on this concept, arguing that numbers and counting are necessary to run hierarchical society. The essay moves skillfully between the present era and the history of mathematics, weaving together a surprisingly interesting argument.

Similarly, in "Origins of the One Percent: The Bronze Age," Zerzan examines Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to show how the domestication that began in the Neolithic era was increasingly institutionalized and expanded during the Bronze Age. He argues that developments during the Bronze Age including urbanization and class helped to anchor domestication. Drawing parallels to the contemporary era, he writes that these early civilizations took on a totalizing and technological vision that ushered in an early age of mass society.

Other pieces such as "Next Nature?" and "Faster! The Age of Acceleration" expand on Zerzan's long-running critique of technology. Criticisms of post-modernism and Marxist thinkers also appear frequently, as does Zerzan's desire to live in a face-to-face band society rather than the electronically mediated mass society of today.

Based on the title of the collection, I expected to see Zerzan build on his critique of nihilism and egoism. Listeners of his weekly Eugene-based Anarchy Radio program are familiar with his ongoing critiques of nihilism and hopelessness and its presence in the anarchist milieu.

Unfortunately, the title essay, "Why Hope?," appears at the very end of the book and is only two pages, giving little space to develop the argument. A more nuanced and stronger piece would have been a great addition to not only this book, but the debate as a whole. Instead, the reader gets just brief references to the argument throughout his essays.

Aside from the title essay, the clearest statement appears within an interview with the author contained in this volume, where he states, "I am hopeful because I see the energy of resistance alive in many places." This sense

of hopefulness is also on display when Zerzan writes about other topics such as animals and consciousness, suggesting there is hope to be found in what cannot be “known” and quantified scientifically. Despite this, a more substantive discussion is notably lacking in the text.

The essays in *Why Hope?* are consistent with Zerzan’s output over the years, offering a mix of new insights and expansions on previously articulated ideas. There is nothing particularly groundbreaking in this collection, but his essays are consistently thought-provoking, thereby assuring that both longtime readers and newcomers will find something of value in this collection.

It is in some ways a predictable collection, but perhaps that is to be expected given that civilization continues to develop. Zerzan has always been an able critic of civilization and *Why Hope?* shows his thought continuing to evolve.

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