

The Way of the Passenger Pigeon

Review: John Zerzan on the End of Civilization

Peter Werbe

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a review of

A People's History of Civilization by John Zerzan. Feral House, 2018 feralhouse.com

Beginning with John Zerzan's 1970s jeremiads in this publication, his predictions of social collapse and later of civilization's were best summed up by the title of his FE #276, January, 1976 article, "The Decline and Fall of Everything."

In *A People's History of Civilization*, his critiques of the basic elements of civilization such as language, agriculture, and even art, were hotly debated in these pages 40 years ago.

However, as evidence of the world's worsening woes have become more manifest, Zerzan now seems even more like Cassandra, cursed by the gods with a gift of prophecy, but who no one believes.

Now, with evidence of imminent collapse increasing (including in a book by that title), concerns of even mainstream writers like Paul Ehrlich, Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking, echo what Zerzan sees as the dire consequences of the planet—wide social and technological system humans have constructed.

For him, in this collection of 16 previously published essays that range in themes from the Bronze Age to the Luddites, cities, and World War I, to "Civilization's Pathological Endgame," we were doomed from the first step towards civilization—representation, symbolism, or ritual of any sort.

It's possible to take away what the book details by a sentence in the first paragraph of the book: "Domestication and agriculture bring ruin to every civilization, including our own now-global version."

What sank Rome and Carthage, Egypt and the Aztecs, now confronts the entire planet. There are so many examples of what looms ahead for us. A particularly striking recent one is the prediction that within a few years, the amount of plastic in the seas will outweigh that of all the fish.

But it's not like civilization brought about an otherwise happy set of circumstances prior to the invention of that substance derived from oil.

Zerzan lays out a frighteningly convincing argument in his essays that from the first moment a man stepped onto a ziggurat tower around 3,000 BCE, constructed by forced labor, to declare that his absolute rule emanated from the gods, humans entered a world built on work and war, hierarchy and patriarchy.

But, when and why did we leave the Garden of Eden, abandon the Golden Age, and enter the terror of history? Cassius tells Brutus as they plot against Julius Caesar, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves..." Just as in the sky-god story of Adam and Eve, eating the apple of knowledge dooms us to the end Zerzan sees approaching.

As humans are forever stained in the Judeo-Christian myth, in the secular story, our social essence will bring us to ruin for leaving a paradisaical existence of hunter/gatherer society for civilization, but without the prospect of a Redeemer.

The human capacity for abstract thought—manifesting in language, symbolism, and representation—lead to increasingly complex societies and finally to agricultural systems and mass societies on every continent.

These states were universally marked by hierarchy, absolute rule, religions which justified power arrangements, slavery, and constant warfare.

Many observers mark the rise of agriculture as the most profound change in human history, as does Zerzan.

But what allowed this mass cultural shift to occur? It wasn't small band society one day and empire with rulers devoted to power and wealth accumulation the next.

Zerzan, relying on the work of interdisciplinary academics, sees the apple in this case as ritual and representation going so far as to indict language, cave paintings, and Stonehenge in the Fall from Grace.

John sees all of what we consider to be human traits as bringing us to the brink of catastrophe.

Jacques Camatte, in *The Wandering of Humanity*, talks about capital that has “run away” from human control.

Link that up with Albert Camus' metaphor of a train barreling down the tracks, passengers supping in an elegant dining car, none realizing the bridge is out around the bend. What happened to the Passenger pigeon can happen to us—a population of billions, and then, zero—in a flash.

Many of John's essays are copiously footnoted with the many sources he draws upon, but he complains at the end of several printed without them that they appeared in “a publication that did not want endnotes.”

I think they read all the better minus them since most are just citations and interrupt the flow of the articles.

Also, dating his essays and crediting where they first appeared would be helpful for understanding the context in which they were written.

The important question for John and for ourselves is, why bother to do anything if we're going to be just a brief, unfortunate instant on a planet billions of years old which will soon correct its balance once we're gone? John doesn't propose an answer so perhaps it's best to enjoy our last supper before the train hits the collapsed trestle.

But, I say no to that, and I'm sure he would agree.

Zerzan's writing needs to be taken as a warning, not as a Cassandra-like prophecy. His chapters on historic resistance to domestication, discipline, and domination illustrate that there really is a “new world in our hearts,” but one that has to be fought for.

The challenge of organizing for revolutionary social change that veers from the fatal trajectory he describes has never been greater.

Peter Werbe is part of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective.

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