

This World We Must Leave

Jason Rodgers

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a review of

When We Are Human by John Zerzan. Feral House 2021

John Zerzan is a longtime advocate of anarcho-primitivism, the form of anarchism that draws inspiration from hunter-gatherer band society and expands the anarchist evaluation to a more total critique of civilization. Many of his original essays laying out this perspective first appeared in these pages in the 1970s.

John does not advocate an immediate return to hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which is commonly used as a straw-man against him. One should look to his older essay, "Postscript to Future Primitive," to see where he does expect to go, since there is little in the way of what is to be done in this collection.

The book's title essay, "When We Are Human," presents a compelling case of archeological and anthropological evidence that, as a species, we became fully modern humans much earlier than previous estimates suggest. His evidence includes, "3.6-million-year-old footprints found in east Africa show two people walking together with a modern gait." The discovery of stone tools in Kenya dating from 3.3 million years ago. And, probably the most important area that Zerzan is currently exploring, "at least 1.5 million years ago, fire was a key development."

This evidence demonstrates that humans had the capacity of forming a state or civilization long before we actually did. This dispels the dogma that either institution was inevitable. Why would we go for almost all of our existence as a species without them if they were foreordained?

In recent years, a few anarcho-primitivists have tried to make arguments against stone tools and fire. At first I thought this was a prank, a bad parody of anarcho-primitivism. But it turned out that this was real.

The argument is that the development of fire or stone tools is the first in a slippery slope towards technocratic totality. If this is a slippery slope, then it is a very slow moving one of millions of years. To me those sorts of views are profoundly Manichean, with the idea that humanity experienced an almost biblical Fall as *Homo erectus*.

Zerzan is more explicit about his idea that before language we were telepathic, citing a scholarly article and Sigmund Freud, no longer concerning himself with whether the idea is acceptable. I've used Zerzan's work on language to explore the intersection of occult, decivilized, deconditioning, and rewilding concepts in *Oak Journal* #1.

This continuing work of critiquing language and symbolic thought points out the limitations inherent in them. Zerzan writes, "Symbols communicate by referring to other symbols, but if we knew only representation we would not be able to evaluate their validity or success as representation."

Critics of Zerzan's analysis of language point out that animals use certain sounds to convey messages between each other. Yet this is clearly not the same thing as what we call symbolic thought. It is similar to language, but it is not the same thing. How do these modes differ? They clearly do, and John could provide some insight into these differences.

There are a number of essays on the subject of nihilism and values in this collection. These essays address some important subjects and current trends, but are flawed. The problem is that the essays are not specific enough, do not name names when critiquing contemporary nihilism.

This is a murky area. Zerzan was often considered one of the foremost nihilists of the 1980s and 1990s. Now, he is one of its foremost critics. However, his positions have not shifted that far.

Instead, the use of the term has. Nihilism means multiple things, and, hence, it is difficult for John to be more specific, as there are no particular prominent thinkers in current nihilism offering an agreed upon definition. There are people who consider themselves nihilists, but their activity tends to take the form of anonymous online shit-posting.

In a similar way to Nietzsche, Zerzan considers society and civilization to be the real force for nihilism. They break us down and crush our spirit. In “Meaning in the Age of Nihilism,” he tries to articulate what has caused such an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness. Though this pointlessness has been a part of civilization since its origin, it came to fruition with the Industrial Revolution. On this Zerzan writes, “This cultural turning point coincides with the decisive ascendancy of industrial life in England (a worldwide first). At base, today’s meaninglessness is a function of machine existence.” The conflict he posits is “The disintegration of cultural meaning and connectedness collides with a will to meaning and value. Modern meaninglessness versus the creation of meaning and value.”

In the essay, “Value and Its Enemies,” John critiques egoist-individualists, because “to base evaluations on one’s subjectivity is an effort to take value out of the picture, to retreat to a supposedly anti-ideological solipsism.” But this evaluation of value based on subjectivity seems nearly identical to his statement that, “Life is a horizon-forming project wherein we seek to find out what matters.” Taken in this sense, John’s conception of value is an existential one, in which the individual must take an active role.

Most problems that exist in these essays, such as the multiple forms of nihilism, could easily be resolved if John were to write longer essays again, like the origin essays in the *Fifth Estate*, or the historical revisionist material from *Elements of Refusal*, or that strange one on music from *Future Primitive*.

There are no dates or publication credits as to when and where the essays in this collection were printed. Context is important. I say this while noting that in my own recently published book, *Invisible Generation: Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory Against the Planetary Work Machine*, I failed to include dates or publication credits, as well. Oops.

Zerzan’s writing deserves to be dealt with honestly. Many criticisms of him are made in bad faith, often lacking in actual argumentation. Maybe this is a characteristic of our degraded internet discourse, that attempts to reduce all ideas to the size of a meme.

Jason Rodgers’ articles appear frequently in these pages. Autonomedia has just published his book, *Invisible Generation: Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory Against the Planetary Work Machine*. His recent communiques, “Affinity and the Passional Conspiracy” and “Command Lines, Control Lines,” are available by mail: PO Box 10894, Albany, NY 12201.

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