

Rewilding

As civilization increasingly fails, radical alternatives are before us

John Zerzan

2024

a review of

Human Rewilding in the 21st Century: Why Anthropologists Fail by James M. Van Lanen. Birch Top Hill Press, 2024

Recently, there has been somewhat surprising interest from mainstream media in topics of domestication and rewilding.

On January 1, National Public Radio devoted an hour to a conversation with Woniya Dawn Thibeault, whose book *Never Alone* recounts her victory in the televised “Alone” arctic competition, with a very sympathetic moderator.

Thibeault stressed wildness, the joy and energy she experienced in communion with a very harsh environment. A powerful, non-compromised embrace of wild nature, including her own! CNN had earlier aired a similar experience and critique from England involving a large parcel of land removed from domestication.

There may be a public opening to basically question an alternative to visibly failing civilization. And into this possible breach is James Van Lanen’s *Human Rewilding in the 21st Century: Why Anthropologists Fail*.

Van Lanen is himself an anthropologist with extensive experience in Alaska with Native peoples, also some in Africa with the Hadza.

Human Rewilding is a contribution of top-flight scholarship that deeply probes the work of contemporary anthropologists of a progressive orientation. At base, rewilding is the active critique of domestication and civilization. The progressives reject it. Van Lanen responds to the recent work of three of them: Noa Levi et al, Ben Pitcher, and Graeber and Wengrow in their much debated, *The Dawn of Everything*.

It becomes instantly clear while reading the book that much more than an academic debate is at stake. In fact, the book reveals two major ironies. One is that it is not the anti-civ perspective that rejects anthropological orthodoxy; rather, it is the progressive outlook that does so.

Since the 1960s, it is orthodox, accepted anthropology that has pointed out the fateful consequences of the defeat of free hunter-gatherer life (plus Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*).

Van Lanen honors work in this regard by the likes of James Woodburn, R.B. Lee, Claude Levi-Strauss, Joseph Tainter, Stanley Diamond, Eleanor Leacock, Tim Ingold, and many other respected thinkers.

It’s not that they would endorse the same radical implications that Van Lanen draws from their work, but that his work stands squarely upon their shoulders. The progressives evade the common verdict about the negative results of domestication and its inner logic of repression, ever greater levels of control. The title of Graeber and Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* reflects this revisionist approach.

The second major irony is related to the first: it’s the Left that emerges as perhaps civilization’s last defender. Van Lanen shows the virulence that progressive anthropologists often exhibit toward the anti-civ point of view. Stunning in a sense, but we might remember that the Left never challenged the basics of domesticated life, not even now when a lethal outcome becomes so starkly evident at every level, in every sphere.

Civilization is chronic war, ever more work, the death of nature and so much more.

Human Rewilding is an extremely important book, very well-written, with equal parts scholarship and passion for life.

John Zerzan has written for the *Fifth Estate* since the 1970s. He is author of several collections of his essays including *When We Are Human: Notes From The Age of Pandemics*, 2021. A memoir will be published later this year by Feral House.

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