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After the anti-corporate globalization protests in Seattle took the world by surprise a year and a half ago, a number of mainstream journalists looked to a soft-spoken anarchist theorist from Eugene, Oregon, for answers.Indeed, John Zerzan, whose ideas were very influential with some of theyoung protesters, can now credibly claim the decidedly dubious honor of being America's most famous anarchist. All the attention has done nothing to soften Zerzan's view that modern society has subjugated the populace to the point that it no longer even sees the bars of its cage. In this interview, the 57-year-old radical explores the roots of domination, the subtle coercion of the clock, and his hope for a future without progress.

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Now that the mainstream media have discovered anarchism, there seems to be more and more confusion about what it means. How do you define it?

I would say anarchism is the attempt to eradicate all forms of domination. This includes not only such obvious forms as the

nation-state, with its routine use of violence and the force of law, and the corporation, with its institutionalized irresponsibility, but also such internalized forms as patriarchy, racism, homophobia. Beyond that, anarchism is the attempt to look even into those parts of our everyday lives we accept as givens, as parts of the universe, to see how they, too, dominate us or facilitate our domination of others.

But has a condition ever existed in which relations have not been based on domination?

That was the human condition for at least 99 percent of our existence as a species, from before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, at least a couple of million years ago, until perhaps only 10,000 years ago, with the emergence of first agriculture and then civilization. Since that time we have worked very hard to convince ourselves that no such condition ever existed, because if no such condition ever existed, it's futile to work toward it now. We may as well then accept the repression and subjugation that define our way of living as necessary antidotes to "evil human nature." After all, according to this line of thought, our pre-civilized existence of deprivation, brutality, and ignorance made authority a benevolent gift that rescued us from savagery.

Think about the images that come to mind when you mention the labels "cave man" or "Neanderthal." Those images are implanted and then invoked to remind us where we would be without religion, government, and toil, and are probably the biggest ideological justifications for the whole van of civilization, armies, religion, law, the state. The problem with those images, of course, is that they are entirely wrong. There has been a potent revolution in the fields of anthropology and archaeology over the past 20 years, and increasingly people are coming to understand that life before agriculture and domestication, in which by domesticating others we domesticated ourselves, was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health.

But if we stop responding, if we really decide not to go along, aren't we doomed also, because the system will destroy us?

Right. It's not so easy. If it were that simple, people would just stay home, because it's such a drag to go through these miserable routines in an increasingly empty culture. But a question we always have to keep in mind is this: We're doomed, but in which way are we more doomed? I recently gave a talk at the University of Oregon in which I spoke on a lot of these topics. Near the end I said, "I know that a call for this sort of overturning of the system sounds ridiculous, but the only thing I can think of that's even more ridiculous is to just let the system keep on going."

How do we know that all the alienation we see around us will lead to breakdown and rejuvenation? Why can't it just lead to more alienation?.

It's a question of how reversible the damage is. Sometimes, and I don't believe this is too much avoidance or denial, sometimes in history things are reversed in a moment when the physical world intrudes enough to knock us off balance. [Raoul] Vaneigem refers to a lovely little thing that gives me tremendous hope. The dogs in Pavlov's laboratory had been conditioned for hundreds of hours. They were fully trained and domesticated. Then there was a flood in the basement. And you know what happened? They forgot all of their training in the blink of an eye. We should be able to do at least that well. I am staking my life on it, and it is toward this end that I devote my work.

How do we know this?

In part through observing modern foraging peoples, what few we've not yet eliminated, and watching their egalitarian ways disappear under the pressures of habitat destruction and oftentimes direct coercion or murder. Also, at the other end of the time scale, through interpreting archaeological digs. An example of this has to do with the sharing that is now understood to be a keynote trait of non-domesticated people. If you were to study hearth sites of ancient peoples, and to find that one fire site has the remains of all the goodies, while other sites have very few, then that site would probably be the chief's. But if time after time you see that all the sites have about the same amount of stuff, what begins to emerge is a picture of a people whose way of life is based on sharing. And that's what is consistently found in preneolithic sites. A third way of knowing is based on the accounts of early European explorers, who again and again spoke of the generosity and gentleness of the peoples they encountered. This is true all across the globe.

How do you respond to people who say this is all just nutty Rousseauvian noble savage nonsense?

I respectfully suggest they read more within the field. This isn't anarchist theory. It's mainstream anthropology and archaeology. There are disagreements about some of the details, but not about the general structure.

If things were so great before, why did agriculture begin?

That's a very difficult question, because for so many hundreds of thousands of years there was very little change. That's long been a source of frustration to scholars in anthropology and archaeology: How could there have been almost zero change for hundreds of thousands of years, the whole lower and middle Paleolithic Era and then suddenly at a certain point in the upper Paleolithic there's this explosion, seemingly out of nowhere? You suddenly have art, and on the heels of that, agriculture.

I think it was stable because it worked, and I think it changed finally because for many millennia there was a kind of slow slippage into division of labor. This happened so slowly, almost imperceptibly, that people didn't see what was happening, or what they were in danger of losing. The alienation brought about by division of labor, alienation from each other, from the natural world, from their bodies, then reached some sort of critical mass, giving rise to its apotheosis in what we've come to know as civilization. As to how civilization itself took hold, I think Freud nailed that one when he said that "civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means of power and coercion." That's what we see happening today, and there's no reason to believe it was any different in the first place.

What's wrong with division of labor?

If your primary goal is mass production, nothing at all. It's central to our way of life. Each person performs as a tiny cog in this big machine. If, on the other hand, your primary goal is relative wholeness, egalitarianism, autonomy, or an intact world, there's quite a lot wrong with it. I think that at base a person is not complete or free insofar as that person's life and the whole surrounding setup depend on his or her being just some aspect of a process, some fraction of it. A divided life mirrors the basic divisions in society and it all starts there. Hierarchy and alienation start there, for example. I don't think anyone would deny the effective control that specialists and experts have in the contemporary world. And I don't think anyone would argue that control isn't increasing with ever-greater acceleration.

But humans are social animals. Isn't it necessary for us to rely on each other?

It's important to understand the difference between the interdependence of a functioning community and a form of dependence that comes from relying on others who have specialized skills you don't have. They now have power over you.

dark before the dawn. I remember when [social critic Herbert] Marcuse wrote One-Dimensional Man. It came out in about 1964, and he was saying that humans are so manipulated in modern consumerist society that there really can be no hope for change. And then within a couple of years things got pretty interesting, people woke up from the '50s to create the movements of the '60s. I believe had he written this book a little later it would have been much more positive.

Perhaps the '60s helped shape my own optimism. I was at the almost perfect age. I was at Stanford in college, and then I moved to Haight Ashbury, and Berkeley was across the Bay. I got into some interesting situations just because I was in the right place at the right time. I agree with people who say the '60s didn't even scratch the surface, but you have to admit there was something going on. And you could get a glimpse, a sense of possibility, a sense of hope, that if things kept going, there was a chance of us finding a different path.

We didn't, but I still carry that possibility, and it warms me, even though 30 years later things are frozen, and awful. Sometimes I'm amazed that younger people can do anything, or have any hope, because I'm not sure they've seen any challenge that has succeeded even partially.

What do you want from your work and your life?

I would like to see a face-to-face community, an intimate existence, where relations are not based on power, and thus not on division of labor. I would like to see an intact natural world and I would like to live as a fully human being. I would like that for the people around me.

Once again, how do we get there from here?

I have no idea. It might be something as simple as everybody just staying home from work. Fuck it. Withdraw your energy. The system can't last without us. It needs to suck our energy. If people stop responding to the system, it's doomed.

who perceive it as inevitable. We're certainly conditioned on all sides to accept that, and we're held hostage to it.

If fewer people believe in progress, what has replaced it?

Inertia. This is it. Deal with it, or else get screwed. You don't hear so much now about the American Dream, or the glorious new tomorrow. Now it's a global race for the bottom as transnational corporations compete to see which can most exploit workers, most degrade the environment. That competition thing works on the personal level, too. If you don't plug into computers you won't get a job. That's progress.

Where does that leave us?

I'm optimistic, because never before has our whole lifestyle been revealed as much for what it is.

Now that we've seen it, what is there to do?

The first thing is to question it, to make certain that part of the discourse of society, if not all of it, deals with these life-and-death issues, instead of the avoidance and denial that characterizes so much of what passes for discourse. And I believe, once again, that this denial can't hold up much longer, because there's such a jarring contrast between reality and what is said about reality. Especially in this country, I would say. Maybe, and this is the nightmare scenario, that contrast can go on forever. The Unabomber Manifesto posits that possibility: People could just be so conditioned that they won't even notice there's no natural world anymore, no freedom, no fulfillment, no nothing. You just take your Prozac every day, limp along dyspeptic and neurotic, and figure that's all there is.

So, how do you see the future playing out?

I was talking to a friend about it this afternoon, and he was giving reasons why there isn't going to be a good outcome, or even an opening toward a good outcome. I couldn't say he was wrong, but as I mentioned before, I'm kind of betting that the demonstrable impoverishment on every level goads people into the kind of questioning we're talking about, and toward mustering the will to confront it. Perhaps now we're in the

Whether they are "benevolent" in using it is really beside the point.

In addition to direct control by those who have specialized skills, there is a lot of mystification of those skills. Part of the ideology of modern society is that without it, you'd be completely lost, you wouldn't know how to do the simplest thing. Well, humans have been feeding themselves for the past couple of million years, and doing it a lot more successfully and efficiently than we do now. The global food system is insane. It's amazingly inhumane and inefficient. We waste the world with pesticides, herbicides, the effects of fossil fuels to transport and store foods, and so on, and literally millions of people go their entire lives without ever having enough to eat. But few things are simpler than growing or gathering your own food.

You've said that we've also come to be dominated by time itself.

Time is an invention, a cultural artifact, a formation of culture. It has no existence outside culture. And it's a pretty exact measure of alienation.

How so?

Everything in our lives is measured and ruled by time, even dreams, as we force them to conform to a workaday world of alarm clocks and schedules. It's really amazing when you think that it wasn't that long ago that time wasn't so disembodied, so abstract. But wait a second. Isn't the tick, tick, tick of a clock about as tangible as you can get?

I really like what anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl wrote about this: "Our idea of time seems to be a natural attribute of the human mind. But that is a delusion. Such an idea scarcely exists where primitive mentality is concerned."

Which means?

Most simply, that they live in the present, as we all do when we're having fun. It has been said that the Mbuti of southern Africa believe that "by a correct fulfillment of the present, the past and the future will take care of themselves."

What a concept!

Primitive peoples generally have no interest in birthdays or measuring their ages. As for the future, they have little desire to control what does not yet exist, just as they have little desire to control nature. That moment-by-moment joining with the flux and flow of the natural world, of course, doesn't preclude an awareness of the seasons, but this in no way constitutes an alienated time consciousness that robs them of the present.

What I'm talking about is hard for us to wrap our minds around because the notion of time has been so deeply inculcated that it's sometimes hard to imagine it not existing.

You're not talking about just not measuring seconds …

I'm talking about time not existing. Time, as an abstract continuing "thread" that unravels in an endless progression that links all events together while remaining independent of them. That doesn't exist. Sequence exists. Rhythm exists. But not time. Part of this has to do with the notion of mass production and division of labor. Tick, tick, tick, as you said. Identical seconds. Identical people. Identical chores repeated endlessly. Well, no two occurrences are identical, and if you are living in a stream of inner and outer experience that constantly brings clusters of new events, each moment is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the moment before. The notion of time simply disappears.

I'm still confused.

You might try this: If events are always novel, then not only would routine be impossible, but the notion of time would be meaningless.

And the opposite would be true as well.

Exactly. Only with the imposition of time can we begin to impose routine. The 14th century saw the first public clocks, and also the division of hours into minutes and minutes into seconds. The increments of time were now as fully interchangeable as the standardized parts and work processes necessary for capitalism.

At every step of the way this subservience to time has been met with resistance. For example, in early fighting in France's July Revolution of 1830, all across Paris people began to spontaneously shoot at public clocks. In the 1960s, many people, including me, quit wearing watches.

For a while in my 20s, I asked visitors to take off their watches as they entered my home. Even today children must be broken of their resistance to time. This was one of the primary reasons for the imposition of this country's mandatory school system on a largely unwilling public. School teaches you to be at a certain place at a certain time, and prepares you for life in a factory. It calibrates you to the system. French situationist Raoul Vaneigem has a wonderful quote about this: "The child's days escape adult time; their time is swollen by subjectivity, passion, dreams haunted by reality. Outside, the educators look on, waiting, watch in hand, till the child joins and fits the cycle of the hours."

Time is important not only sociologically and ecologically, but also personally. If I can share another quote, it would be [Austrian philosopher Ludwig] Wittgenstein's "Only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy." Just last year I came across an account by the 18th-century explorer Samual Hearne, the first white man to explore northern Canada. He described Indian children playing with wolf pups. The children would paint the pups' faces with vermilion or red ochre, and when they were done playing with them return them unhurt to the den. Neither the pups nor the pups' parents seemed to mind at all. Now we gun them down from airplanes. That's progress for you.

More broadly, what has progress meant in practice?

Progress has meant the looming specter of the complete dehumanization of the individual and the catastrophe of ecological collapse. I think there are fewer people who believe in progress now than ever, but probably there are still many