

Anarchism = Zerzan?

Michael Albert

In a number of mainstream media outlets, anarchism has recently been associated with John Zerzan. In my last ZNet commentary (www.zmag.org), I instead suggested that anarchism ought to be associated with identifying structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination throughout life and with challenging them as conditions and the pursuit of justice permit. Anarchism would seek to eliminate subordination based on political and economic power, power relations among men and women and between parents and children, power among cultural communities, power over future generations, and much else as well. I then suggested that emerging from this were different strands of activism. One, I argued, went from the above to rejecting technology, institutions, and reforms per se. The other, I argued, is seeking to expand the conceptual base of anarchism to more fully comprehend extra-political dimensions of life, to develop sound vision, and to elaborate and win non-reformist reforms that enhance people's current lives and further empower future struggles leading toward ultimate goals.

I made this differentiation and opted firmly for the latter approach without naming advocates of either because I wanted to avoid discussing individual people and instead focus on ideas and choices. Some felt, however, that I was wrong to critique a trend — the “not so desirable anarchism” — without giving evidence of its actual existence and examining its actual self-representations.

Okay, the most visible advocate and exemplar of what I called “not so desirable anarchism” is John Zerzan. Of course other folks are also in the camp, but sticking to Zerzan's work should amply display at least the most touted arguments behind the positions I reacted against.

Zerzan starts out by anarchistically rejecting all authoritarian constraints on human well being and development. This is admirable, of course, but where does he wind up?

Well, Zerzan rejects technology per se. He rejects all institutions that distinguish different tasks and responsibilities for different actors, which is all institutions per se. He derivatively contributes to rejecting the idea of all reforms because no institution is worthy of improvements, so no improvements are worthy of our time. But even beyond these three themes of my last essay, Zerzan also rejects language, math, and even counting items or registering time passage. I think all these rejections repeat the same error that other opponents of all technology, all institutions, and all reforms also make, though Zerzan does it most relentlessly. Let's see.

Zerzan tells us “that technology has never been neutral, like some discreet tool detachable from its context. It always partakes of and expresses the basic values of the social system in which it is

embedded. Technology is the language, the texture, the embodiment of the social arrangements it holds together.” This is unobjectionable, though it neglects another point that Zerzan never returns to. Yes, technologies bear the mark of the society they are born and used in. How could it be otherwise? However, technologies not only reflect those societies’ attributes, including their worst, but also often meet real needs and expand real potentials. So you get electric chairs to kill people and assembly lines to constrain them, but you also get warm clothes for people to wear, and penicillin to enhance their longevity.

Zerzan says technologies are contextual, and of course they are. They arise in some social setting. They are produced in it, or perhaps another. They are used in it, or perhaps a third. Technologies don’t spring spontaneously from nothing with no lineage and imprint. Nor are technologies utilized in social vacuums. Zerzan is correct that each technology, whether a pencil or a shoe lace much less a guided missile or an assembly line, bears a social inscription carrying into it diverse imprints of the motives of its conception, production, and utilization — part of which generally reflect the defense of social elites, but another part of which often reflect the accomplishing of needed functions. We should therefore expect technologies conceived, produced, and utilized in feudal times to be different than those in prehistoric times, or than those in capitalist times. So it is elementary.

Zerzan moves on, however, to a point that is not at all elementary. He says, “the idea that [technology] is neutral, that it is separable from society, is one of the biggest lies available. It is obvious why those who defend the high-tech death trap want us to believe that technology is somehow neutral.” This is disingenuous hand-waving, I think, or else evidences an immense confusion.

That is, when someone says that technology per se is neutral, they of course mean that technology does not by its internal logic have to serve only dominating elites. Technology can serve any constituency including broad populations. Technology can arise in any social setting and system, and can accomplish diverse tasks that can be beneficial or horrendous, humane or cruel, liberating or stultifying. Technology isn’t necessarily prehistoric, or feudal, or capitalist, or anything else other than always a product of human design and labors, and having a human origin imposes on technology no particular social direction, no universal social stamp. Zerzan rightly notices that our contemporary technologies encapsulate forces at play in our societies. He wrongly concludes, however, that all technology must forever and always be as our technology is now. It is therefore not true that if we don’t like specific instances of our technology now, to get rid of them we must dispense all technology per se.

The most obvious way to discern the unwarranted leap in Zerzan’s claim is to note that without technology humans would have no clothes, no source of power outside their own muscles, and not even agriculture to renew their muscles. Life would be brutish, isolated, and short. Disease would be rampant. Communication, mobility, knowledge, music, art, play, and pretty much everything else would be harshly limited. This alone ought to close the case, of course, that eliminating technology per se is not the way to avoid the ills of harmful technologies. But another way to see the point rests on examining Zerzan’s logic.

Suppose I were to say that all human thought, all human expression, emotion, and even locomotion, manifests an imprint of the society in which it occurs. This is certainly equally true as saying that all technology bears such a societal imprint. So now what? Do I follow Zerzan to deduce from the fact that it is imprinted — like technology is — that all human thought, expression, emotion, and even locomotion must always embody oppressive attributes so that I should

reject them all in the same way that Zerzan says we should reject technology? Or do I assert that in desirable social settings (and to a degree even in undesirable ones) human thought, expression, emotion, and even locomotion also have wonderful and essential attributes that we certainly don't want to reject, and that in good environments the defining features can become overwhelmingly positive making the idea of rejecting them utterly ridiculous? I prefer the latter logic, both for human attributes and for technologies.

Zerzan, in contrast consistently prefers the former logic. His mistake is to rightly notice various horrible technologies but then wrongly attribute the problem they pose not to mutable social structures and institutions which impose the bad features on the technologies and the bad technologies on us, but to the entire category of technology per se. Ubiquitous manifestation of this leap from disliking instances of some category to rejecting the whole category would lead to rejecting pretty much everything that is social or otherwise a product of human exchange and thought, but which turns up with horrible aspects in contemporary societies, and would thus imply wanting humans to revert to a kind of pre-humanity state. Amazingly, Zerzan follows exactly that trajectory.

Thus, Zerzan offers that "my working hypothesis is that division of labor draws the line [between a desirable prehistory and everything since], with dire consequences that unfold in an accelerating or cumulative way. Specialization divides and narrows the individual, brings in hierarchy, creates dependency and works against autonomy." And he continues by deducing that "tools or roles that involve division of labor engender divided people and divided society."

That is, again Zerzan drags partial truths to outrageous conclusions. Of course typical corporate divisions of labor diminish and even destroy individual and social potentials. Zerzan points out, for example, that "the first 'breakthrough' for me was in terms of the Industrial Revolution in England. Namely, it became clear that the factory system was introduced in large part as a means of social control. The dispersed craftsmen were deprived of their autonomy and brought together in factories to be de-skilled and disciplined. This shows that technology was not at all 'neutral.'" Perhaps Zerzan first encountered brilliant expression of such ideas a quarter century ago in the same places I first did, for example, in the wonderful essay by Steven Marglin, "What do bosses do?" or in Harry Braverman's *Monthly Review* work. But if so, he missed the key insight that the imposed division of labor served specific social relations and elites, and that the problem posed for suffering humanity wasn't that different people were doing different tasks per se, but was the particular limited combinations of tasks that most of the people were compelled to do, as well as what little they received for it.

Zerzan is right, of course, that (corporate and sexist and racist) divisions of labor have buttressed hierarchy, imposed dependency, and impeded autonomy. And of course many institutions incorporate these damaging divisions of labor and therefore deserve rejection. But beyond this, virtually all institutions involve roles that diversify people's tasks and responsibilities. To jump from the correct and familiar insight that some divisions of labor are horrible so that institutions embodying them are unworthy, to then claiming that no division of labor at all can be abided and therefore all institutions are unworthy, says that each individual must, in essence, either do everything for him or herself or at least only randomly seize on doing this and that task without lasting institutional coordination with others. It rejects roles per se and leads to an anti-institutional, anti-social, and I think ultimately even anti-human stance. So rather than solely rejecting imposed divisions of labor that are contrary to our aspirations, which would be fine, Zerzan argues all divisions of labor of any kind have to go.

Should we reject divisions of labor that relegate many to obedience and rote boredom while privileging an elite few with empowering and engaging endeavors? Of course. About this Zerzan and I presumably agree. But the way to do this isn't to have everyone do everything with no differentiation of different people's responsibilities. The way to do it is not to ignore that people have diverse tastes and inclinations that they rightly wish to express in their actions. And it is not to forego garnering the worthy gains that can accrue from taking advantage of skills and training. Why throw out the baby of productivity and individuality/diversity with the bathwater of alienation/hierarchy? Why not divide tasks into jobs that are balanced for empowerment and quality of life implications (to eliminate hierarchy), and that are self-managed (to eliminate alienation), even as they also respect different actor's personal tastes? Get rid of the hierarchy/alienation inducing aspects — the bathwater — of course. But keep the fulfilling and beneficial attention to different people's preferences and the utilization of diversity to increase the breadth of our collective experiences and also increase output and diminish required labor.

So why does Zerzan pose the problem as no division of labor versus a bad division of labor (and similarly as no technology versus bad technology), rather than as a bad division of labor versus a good division of labor (or as bad technology versus good technology)? One possible line of thought leading someone to propose such limiting polarities would be to notice the one thing that all divisions of labor (and all technologies) have in common, which is their being a human and social creation, and deciding that this commonality somehow inevitably infects them with harmful aspects. I am not sure Zerzan believes this, nor sure if it matters much, because in any event intended or not this is the practical and intellectual implication of his stance. Thus, Zerzan says, "it seems evident that industrialization and the factories could not be gotten rid of instantly, but equally clear that their liquidation must be pursued with all the vigor behind the rush of break-out. Such enslavement of people and nature must disappear forever, so that words like production and economy will have no meaning." In other words, we not only have to eliminate bad economic activity that divides us into unequal classes, or that exploits us, or that despoils us, or that degrades us, all of which I certainly agree with, but we have to eliminate economic activity tout court. It is human artifacts that must go, it seems. As with technology and division of labor, so with economy as a whole, we must opt for all or nothing. No more production for Zerzan. No more workplaces. And what do we put in their place? Foraging, it seems, because that bears no mark of specifically human invention. So Zerzan rejects tools and roles, technologies and institutions, and even production and economy, but amazingly, doesn't stop there. He takes this line of thought all the way to its ultimate destinations, going well beyond the confusions of "the not so desirable anarchism" I discussed last essay.

Zerzan rejects even language, for example. He tells us that in "the process of transforming all direct experience into the supreme symbolic expression, language, monopolizes life. Like ideology, language conceals and justifies, compelling us to suspend our doubts about its claim to validity. It is at the root of civilization, the dynamic code of civilization's alienated nature. As the paradigm of ideology, language stands behind all of the massive legitimation necessary to hold civilization together. It remains for us to clarify what forms of nascent domination engendered this justification, made language necessary as a basic means of repression." The problem is now civilization...that is, humans entwined in social arrangements of their own creation, conceived to allow each to pursue their lives as they will without having to operate atomistically or in opposition to all others. Since words are a big part of the glue of such arrangements, says Zerzan, let's dispense with them rather than try to fulfill their potential.

“Words bespeak a sadness; they are used to soak up the emptiness of unbridled time. We have all had that desire to go further, deeper than words, the feeling of wanting only to be done with all the talk, knowing that being allowed to live coherently erases the need to formulate coherence,” says Zerzan. And of course one doesn’t want to live by words alone, or bread alone, or technology alone, or anything else alone. But that is not the same as wanting to entirely dispense with each. Likewise, of course we express sadness in words, but also in deeds and feelings. Should we thus relegate not only words, but also deeds and feelings to the junkyard? And consciousness is surely also often a bulwark of existing oppressions. Conscious sometimes manifests sadness and is often used in authoritative ways. Let’s lobotomize, too. For that matter, why not notice that sexual intercourse has very often been fraught with painful ramifications, not to mention outright violations, and virtually universally to date in history with asymmetries of power? Why not dump sex too? Shortly thereafter there will be no more humans, and, Zerzan is correct, also no more human suffering. Terminating just short of this species suicide, Zerzan’s agenda, or hope, seems to me to be that we should end divisions of labor, reject technology, discard institutions, silence language, eliminate numbers, reject time, and perhaps dispense consciousness — though not reproduction — returning to prehistoric relations. And the mainstream media says Zerzan is an exemplar of anarchism. No wonder.

You think I exaggerate? Well, judge for yourself. Zerzan says, “my tentative position is that only a rejection of symbolic culture [that is, language] provides a deep enough challenge to what stems from that culture.” Thus: reject language. Or “only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning.” Not just language, but time too. Wordplay is all well and good for provocative or aesthetic exercises or entertainment. But Zerzan claims to be challenging the realities that crush out people’s lives. That carries a responsibility, it seems to me, to attend to reality.

Zerzan rejects numbers too. To explain why, he tells us that “Euclid developed geometry — literally, ‘land measuring’ — to measure fields for purposes of ownership, taxation, and the assignment of slave labor.” And: “When members of a large family sit down to dinner, they know immediately, without counting, whether someone is missing. Counting becomes necessary only when things become homogenized.” Can this be serious? Apparently so. The thought pattern is by now familiar, after all. Zerzan rightly notes that numbers can be used in harmful or alienating ways and to service authority and power. Anyone would conclude that in some pursuits we are better off without numbers. Fair enough. But Zerzan wrongly extrapolates that we’d be best off without numbers all the time. Goodbye to language, goodbye to numbers and time, goodbye to technology and institutions...why not goodbye to sex one wonders? After all, sex frequently manifests and undergirds harmful behavior too.

In the prior essay on Anarchism’s trends I tried to focus on the important confusions about technology, institutions, and reforms that I think are diminishing the affectivity of a particular strain of “not so desirable anarchism,” and also on the more positive insights about breadth of focus, new vision, and non-reformist reforms that give another strain of anarchism the potential to become central to successful activism in years ahead.

Zerzan’s thinking examined for this essay may or may not typify why some folks hold the not so desirable views they do about technology, institutions, and reforms. I have no way of knowing that. In any event, Zerzan is most forthright, and the Zerzan quotations I employed are from various essays and interviews he has done, all available on the internet. I found most of the essays quoted on a site named “Primitivism” at www.primitivism.com Additional sites

will immediately pop up if you search Google or Yahoo or any other large internet engine for primitivism or for Zerzan, and within the links listed, if interested, you will find other adherents of views like Zerzan's.

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