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John Zerzan and the primitive confusion, by En Attendant: A Review

Paul Petard

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Paul Petard reviews a pamphlet criticising the primitivism of John Zerzan.

This Chronos pamphlet, *John Zerzan and the primitive confusion* is a reprint of a French text which was translated in September 2000 to coincide with a talk in London by the political neo-primitivist John Zerzan. The talk was hosted by U.K. *Green Anarchist* and Zerzan's subject was the Green Anarchist movement in America. The text dealt critically with two of John Zerzan's books, "Future Primitive" and "Elements of Refusal", and criticised them for being an ideological re-writing of the history of humanity.

I made the mistake myself of going to the talk in London, and I was disappointed to find Zerzan, and more particularly his U.K. *Green Anarchist* hosts, talking some tiresome tosh against **all** technology, against **all** towns and cities, against any agriculture except the most basic smallest scale subsistence horticulture, against electricity, against language, rationality, logic, against any large or so-

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phisticated human interaction. The only valid thing for them being very small neo-primitive subsistence groups and isolated individuals as a compulsory universal model for everyone. All those who don't conform to this are to be despised and regarded as the enemy.

As I have argued before elsewhere, I am opposed to the despotic policy proposal of some "communists" that hermits ought to be eaten for protein because they are outside community, to the contrary I am very much in favour of leaving alone the eccentric individualists and isolationists and those who need a bit of temporary solitude. But those who are not into this and want to live freely in larger communities are not necessarily the enemy.

Now what is the solution to the world's problems as far as the political neo-primitivist is concerned?- why it is the very presence in the world of the humans that is the problem. And if the majority of the humans conveniently disappeared then that would solve the problems. There's quite a few neo-primitivist characters who will wring their hands with glee in a doom mongering fatalist way at the prospect of ecological disaster. They hope major catastrophe will teach the majority of those stupid humans a lesson and destroy all their towns and houses. Certainly there are plenty of things for us to worry about and act upon in the world today, but doomsday politics is a con.

We spoke up and tried to put the case for umbrellas as aesthetically pleasing and practically useful objects the knowledge of which comes to us because of the complex productive interaction and intelligent discourse of many humans. You can if you choose make the things out of "natural" materials like bamboo and stuff. But some of the green anarcho-puritans in the room wouldn't have it; umbrellas were wicked and evil and part of civilization and there be devils among us. Another comrade pointed out how Zerzan's talk was based on a deeply pessimistic view of humanity; nearly everything these humans do they nearly always do bad.

It should be asked whether *Green Anarchist* themselves might be more correctly titled Green Bolshevik. They have ended up

constructing the perfect ready-made megalomaniac misanthropic petty-terrorist ideology. An ultra-green elite vanguard, themselves of course, can sneer at the rest of “civilised” humanity, and everything and everybody living in the modern world becomes a legitimate target. Mind you an ideology like this can become tempting for a few minutes if you ever find yourself squashed up on a crowded commuter train full of accountants and systems analysts stuck outside a station one morning.

Anyway back to the pamphlet; “John Zerzan And The Primitive Confusion”. Here En Attendant argue that Zerzan is engaging in an ideological re-writing of the history of humanity, he makes use of different research works by prehistorians, anthropologists and philosophers with the sole aim of establishing a pre-conceived idea of what humanity is all about, has been and will become. The trouble is pre-history is a field of very shifting knowledge and based on extremely fragmented traces, animal and human bones and carved stones. The ideas we have of prehistoric periods cannot be precise, the picture keeps changing and new complicated questions get thrown up.

The text accuses Zerzan of wanting to paint an idyllic picture of the origins of humanity and therefore only seeking elements that will permit him to paint this picture. “For Zerzan, scientific discoveries are just a way to develop his ideology... clearly he will take no account of what hinders him, he will reserve the right of using the argument of scientific authority when it will be convenient for him, and to reject it when it will cease to be convenient to him. Here is the essential of Zerzan’s “method”, which can be found in all his texts.” The authors make a comparison of Zerzan’s method, “scientific activity put at the service of an ideology”, with that of a character like Lysenko.

Zerzan wants to presume that a vegetarian gathering rather than hunting must have been the natural state of ancient humanity, so he wants to ignore or play down evidence of hunting activity before Neanderthals. The text accuses Zerzan of deliberately ignoring,

for instance, evidence of hunting by *Homo habilis*, the very first humans, at the site of Olduvai in Tanzania 1.8 million years ago, and also at the site of Vallonnet 950,000 years ago (Neanderthals not emerging until about 400,000 years ago). “One can see clearly that even by dating back humanity to its most ancient representative he does not manage... to demonstrate the existence of “good” humanity which he is looking for... The surest way of being wrong in the face of whatever reality is to want at all costs to make it say something.”

Zerzan’s thesis in “Future Primitive” is basically that “progress” and division of labour, domestication, symbolic culture, were consciously, intelligently and deliberately refused until fairly recently in human existence. En Attendant point out the potential contradiction in this; how can you consciously and intelligently refuse something you have no knowledge of? And no specific evidence has been found suggesting temporary experiments by ancient humans with agriculture which were then abandoned and refused, which is not to say it may never have happened. But they go on to argue; “In fact, as soon as humans have practised agriculture or the rearing of animals, they have never gone “backwards”. We have cases at the beginning of the Neolithic era of sedentary humans also practising gathering and hunting but these groups afterwards evolved solely towards agriculture.” And they claim; “Settled culture, once it is formed, is never abandoned.”

Now I am not sure this last generalised claim is strictly true. One can look at an example in modern Mongolia: since the fall of Stalinism thousands of Mongolians have left the planned urban housing blocs and the failed industrialisation projects and have taken up a new modern semi-nomadic travelling/ herding lifestyle. They haven’t become primitive again or rejected technology, they still drive vehicles and listen to the radio etc. Meanwhile worldwide, millions of “settled” workers are now being pushed by economic pressures to uproot themselves and become modern transient economic refugees. Of course, this is not neo-primitivism.

(and the “revolution” might not at all be soon). Like old derelict mills dotted around the landscape, the big chunks missing from the ozone layer and rainforest will serve as grim follies and monuments reminding us of a different grim past.

En attendant also don't seem to appreciate how material conditions and physical scale, the quantity of resources and density of population for instance, may have some influence on the various social forms that might occur in a given situation. Maybe it is just possible to imagine a city of a million people being “managed” in a non-exploitative and non-hierarchical way, without capital and domination. But if the population grows beyond a critical point and gets too crowded won't it become increasingly difficult to “manage” it in this way? Even if such a city is run on egalitarian lines the physical pressure of overcrowding could still end up being harmful to both the humans and the environment, won't such pressures tend to harm and deform the egalitarianism? Even a hard left communist like Bordiga could see it would be useful to communism to reduce the massive population imbalance between urban areas and rural areas.

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As to the question of agriculture, just why did it develop in the first place? The passage to the Neolithic era still remains quite a mystery. There are only theories. The theory that the development of agriculture was provoked by climate change is dismissed by En Attendant. They suggest there were at least 15 significant climate changes in the relevant period, but agriculture didn't develop in each case. Nonetheless is this dismissal acceptable? Climate change may well have been a catalyst in the birth of agriculture, particularly if it coincided with cross pollination of certain plants creating new varieties particularly suited to agriculture that hadn't existed before. So maybe it does take at least 15 climatic changes over 3 million years to help successfully kick off this agriculture thing.

What they do say about the development of agriculture is: “Human societies seem to aspire more to their own conservation, to the upholding of their own structures than to the domination of the surrounding environment... What took place during the Neolithic era, is that the conservation of the social structures went through the domination of the natural environment, a domination that in turn brought about the creation of new structures”

The text scoffs at Zerzan's notion of a “face-to-face society”, his desire to “live in the present”, his affinity for the spontaneity of the hippies, his like of psychedelic drugs, his individualism etc. They also sneer at Zerzan for being, as they put it, an “American feminist”. Here in my opinion the text actually starts taking an ugly turn. The authors slag Zerzan for being “moralistic” for seeing “evil” in stocking (no stupid, not “stockings”, but stocking; storing and hoarding etc.), in agriculture, in complex organisation etc. But are they not being “moralistic” and puritan themselves in scoffing at psychedelic drugs (according to them psychedelic drugs are all a C.I.A. plot), at youth movements, at the practical preference some may have for organising in smaller groups, at “individualism”?

The authors show their own miserable big-bourgeois collectivist prejudices in their sneering at “individualism”. They sneer at “wounded individualism” and the isolated “vegetable”. But it is

not just peasants and small farmers in the third world who have a real material need to defend their remaining individual space and petit informal reserves against the relentless encroachment and enclosure against them. Individualised and atomised workers under dispersed fordism in the developed world also have perfectly good reason to defend their individual space and what little reserves, whether social or individual, they have left against further encroachment by both corporate capital and state capital. It is part of the process of defending both the individual and the social wage, and what amounts in part to an informal strike fund, while under capital.

This “individualism” of the individual peasant or the individualised worker, defending what remains of their petit reserves, can only be regarded as “reactionary” to the extent that you are mad, bad and stupidly Marxist enough to think that enclosure by big capital and state capital is in any way “progressive”. For instance, only a very sentimental variety of ultra-leftist would think it in workers’ interests to demand lower individual wages and less housing in order to bring themselves closer to “communism”. And here paradoxically, in their sneering at modern “individualism”, En Attendant end up slipping into their own backward looking trajectory.

The individual spaces and petit reserves of the modern atomised individualised worker are there to be subtly subverted and detoured into something socially radical, ultimately to be turned against capital and state. They should not be despised or scapegoated as the cause of all the social ills. In this respect it is the collectivist marxists and the collectivist sociologists who are the ones who are really guilty of fetishising and exalting the abstract “individual” in order to scapegoat it. When vulgar ultra-left collectivists adopt a puritan stance of being anti “individualism”, all they are really doing is ganging up with collective capital, with social democratic politicians, and with the clergy. Their solution to the problem of individual alienation is merely to suppress it under a collective alienation, a collectivist property, or some bureaucratic

collectivist gang. The question of workers’ individual pride and individual dignity is not just a question of conservatism. At the same time the social solidarity and mutual aid of the exploited and oppressed in struggle is not necessarily the same as collectivism. Meanwhile doesn’t the Stalinist union bureaucrat always attack the autonomous wildcat strikers for their “individualism” and parody them as “petty-bourgeois”?

In the future under “communism” if there is not a degree of tolerance for some individual space and some individual autonomy then the real sentient physical individual humans will be suffocated and crushed. And the supposed “communism” will have succeeded in suffocating and crushing itself in the process. So we are both pro radical individualist and pro-communist at the same time! — and we revolt against the prejudice that this must be a contradiction. As for any form of collectivism that might have a radical side, like a wildcat strike committee that actually had some clout, we fear a lot of it of it died out in the early eighties. Only a weak rump remains.

En Attendant finish off, as one would expect, with a rant about “revolution”: “When, for example, the revolution is done (which no doubt will be soon, of course) we will occupy ourselves intelligently re-foresteering the millions of hectares devastated by industrial agriculture, this will not be done by the action of “small isolated groups”. And if, as an individual, I have the good fortune to participate in this collective action, I will be quite indifferent to inscribing my name on each tree I will have planted, and that besides, without doubt, I will not see reaching maturity. I will not feel less an individual for that.”

Now maybe I’m being too paranoid in my reading of the above passage, but it does hint a little to me of some sort of state socialist collectivist labouring army, or mass compulsory work team; yuk! The painful truth is that a lot of the damage to the environment is semi-permanent and we are just going to have to live with a lot of it for some time into any post-industrial, post-capitalist situation