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When We Are Human, by John Zerzan – a review

Julian Langer

17 July 2021

[DISCLAIMER] – following the publication of this review Zerzan has apologised publicly on his radio show for his piece on autism and I personally consider the matter to be resolved, though I can't speak for anyone else. If you want to hear the apology, the episode can be listened to here – https://archive.org/details/anarchy-radio-07-20-2021_202107. I've made no changes to this review following this, but want it to be acknowledged openly.

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<ecorevoltblog.wordpress.com/2021/07/17/when-we-are-human-by-john-zerzan-a-review>

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When I found that a copy of Zerzan's new book, *When We Are Human*, had reached me I was immediately excited and keen to read. I am continually moved by Zerzan's thought and writings, despite many points of difference in perspective or approach. It was largely a desire to encounter these differences that motivated me to email John and ask him to send me a copy of the book, to review. As I encountered these points of difference in perspective I was mostly very glad to experience them, because they affirmed

my experience of John Zerzan as someone who is not me and someone I can appreciate for being-them and the thought being-theirs – there is one point of the text, which I go into more detail on in a more critical section of this review, that, I will share at this point, did offend me and is in my eyes the worst thing I’ve ever read by Zerzan; but I will state that much of this text is some of the best and most beautiful writings by Zerzan.

This book, in my eyes, is largely a response to anti-humanist thought – thought that is critical of the concept of “human” – and misanthropic thought – thought pertaining to human-hating collectivised bigotry – within anarchist and environmentalist theory and practice. I have described my thought as anti-humanist and feel that label is somewhat fair placed on me, and with this encounter this quality of the book as an attempt to save an aspect of Zerzan’s thought that is very intense – anthropological-realism. It seems clear to me that Zerzan believes in Humanity, very much from an anthropologically-centred world-view, and I appreciate this quality of his thought, as Zerzan seeks to defend Humanity from misanthropic hatred, bigotry and abuse – though it is undeniable that there is a strong anthropocentrism within Zerzan’s thought, with animal, floral and mineral life being all-but-excluded from the thought within this text (perhaps there is potential for a follow up from Zerzan, drawing from anthrozoology and zoopoetics[?]).

There are some stunningly beautiful pieces of writing in this collection. An example of this early on in the text is a section on fire, where Zerzan shares personal encounters with fire in a way that I thoroughly enjoyed. While the book is somewhat history-dense, I enjoyed Zerzan’s affirmation of the Luddite rebellions, his (attempted) destruction of Enlightenment thought and a section affirming anti-history that also acknowledges that “this book ... is a testimony to the need for historical awareness” – a wonderful contradiction/paradox, which I feel truly embodies so much of Zerzan’s work. Like many other of his books, there are excellent di-

most lacking within this book, like most of Zerzan's writings, is the individual writing the book – I feel so much affirmation for those points where we do encounter this individual within the text.

Being honest, I am uncertain how to end this review. This book truly embodies both the best and the worst of Zerzan's thought, and I am sincerely grateful for having been sent the copy that is in front of me now, for the purpose of writing this review. I am intending to write John a poem, in pen, and send him a couple of my drawings, in the hopes that he might receive them and experience an affirmation of poetry and art that is individual, non-Systematic and perhaps stupid and absurd (but okay). I guess, my final thought regarding this book is that this book has really affirmed to me that it is okay to feel conflictual, contradictory and split feelings about any book, writer and individual – I can survive the confusion and, I believe, you can too!

atribes seeking to destroy time, technology and the failure that is civilisation. My favourite section of this book, which I think might be Zerzan's best piece of writing, is the section titled Experience, where he affirms that "(w)e must uncover, reclaim, the immediacy of lived experience ..." and that "(t)he absence of mediation doesn't last ...". These are all aspects of the book that I value and feel appreciation for.

The positioning of this critical turn is very intentional and I believe that this would likely be obvious if I were not stating it outright here. I go into more detail on the aspects of the book that I am critiquing here than those I am affirming as valuable, as I feel that the desirable qualities of this book need my affirmation less than the undesirable qualities deserve my destruction. It should be clear that I am positing value in this book as worth-reading-and-considering and I encourage no one reading these critical points to reject the book because of them. The three areas being critiqued are a section on autism, Zerzan's anti-philosophy and the matters of individualism, egoism, nihilism and postmodernism (and how much [perhaps] John misses the fucking point[!]).

The piece on autism is the only piece of writing by Zerzan that has ever left me feeling utterly disgusted by him and I will not deny that it is offensive to try and save John some face. Zerzan attempts to make the argument that autism is a product of civilisation and contemporary domesticating-distance, and that Humanity is losing its humanness to becoming-autistic, relying on many stereotypes regarding individuals we call autistic that I can tell you, from my lived experience of working with autistic individuals, are often bullshit. From a primitivist historical-anthropological-realist ideology, Zerzan's positioning of autism is easily rejectable, given the likelihood of autistic individuals having distinct advantages in hunter-gather contexts¹ and the likelihood of their being "cham-

¹ www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/06/110603122849.htm

pioned” in the context of pre-civilised communities². Positioning individuals this culture calls autistic as being not-desirable, or less-than(-Human), is the worst part of this book and the worst I’ve ever read by Zerzan.

With regards to Zerzan’s anti-philosophy, while I am sympathetic to his rejection of Enlightenment thought (perhaps from a slightly different route there) and his rejection of much of the thought that Enlightenment builds from; I feel that Zerzan both misses something and thoroughly fails to affirm those aspects of philosophy – as a lived experience, not an ideology bound to the Academy – that has impacted his thought and life. Zerzan makes it clear at one point of his attacks against philosophy that he does not identify as a philosopher, which I find strange, as I certainly consider Zerzan to be a philosopher, with his anti-philosophy being a philosophy-of-philosophy – to the extent that there are these objects called “philosophy” and “philosophers” I’d affirm is only true in name, but still hold discursive relevance. Zerzan calls philosophy an “impersonal pursuit”, which (again) strikes me as bizarre, as I couldn’t imagine a more personal area of study than philosophy. In a section titled A Note On Freedom, Zerzan affirms freedom, mostly through affirming resistance from within death camps – in a very similar way to that done in the anarcho-nihilist book Blessed is the Flame – and this is perhaps the most intensely personal-philosophical act I can imagine any individual doing, as I am aware that I often experience my individuality most intensely through the experience of pain, with all the existential aspects that invokes. I do love that Zerzan’s final paragraph in his essay The Case Against Philosophy affirms Diogenes of Sinope (who is a personal philosophical hero of mine) and cynicism, while noting a peculiarity to this, given Diogenes’ mockery of Plato, who Zerzan

² www.zmescience.com/science/news-science/autism-stone-age-evolution/

draws from at one point (though perhaps missed Plato’s meaning in the allegory of the cave).

This final critical thought (obviously drawing from the last one) regards another paradox/contradiction within Zerzan’s writings/philosophy/thought that I can understand and appreciate, but encounter often as disappointing. Now, it seems clear to me that Zerzan’s desires are rooted in an affirmation of Life over anthropological-machinery/Leviathan/civilisation, or as I will term it here the System – this is not being questioned in any way. What I notice though is that, when Zerzan is attempting to negate art, poetry, Decadence, aestheticism and nihilism, he is not doing so from any affirmation of the Life that is the experience of being-individual, but from a Systemic-perspective, opposing them as a mode-of-Systematising – I will note here that in my book Feral Consciousness I affirm the hyper-exploitation(/acceleration) of symbolic-aestheticism, to its inevitable point of collapse, to affirm the post-collapse eco-aestheticism; in my book Feral Life affirm poetry and art for their non-systematising and animalising potential; and in my book Feral Iconoclasm affirm a life-affirming nihilism, based in absurdity. (These areas are those where I most intensely differentiate from Zerzan’s thought.) Alongside the intensely Systematic qualities of Zerzan’s writings, the individual gets affirmed in this book in his critique of ritual, his extremely beautiful (philosophical) piece on death (very relevant within mass-extinction culture) and in other sections, that are far less Systems-oriented. I notice this Systemetic quality most when, like when Zerzan seeks to negate art and poetry, Zerzan fails to recognise, or even affirm an inability to recognise, what nihilism and the destruction (de-struction/de-structuring/de-constructing [which I affirm as a positive-activity]) of value might mean to individuals who find beauty (or, dare I say, value) in them. Those individuals are life, they are alive, not the Systems that Zerzan places as more valuable than their lived experience. And it should be noted that, within all this Systematising, sadly, the individual