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What Do Streams Want?

2008

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What Do Streams Want?

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endgame, Volumes I & II

by Derrick Jensen

Seven Stories Press

New York, NY

929 pages. Paper. \$18.95

Prior to the release of *endgame* there was quite a bit of buzz about the book in anti-civilization circles. The expectation was that this book was going to make explicit Jensen's previous flirtations with anarcho-primitivism (for instance his widely republished interview with John Zerzan from *The Sun*). Volume one was going to make the strong indictment of Civilization, volume two would discuss how, exactly, to bring civilization down. *endgame* was expected to be an anarcho-primitivist manifesto by someone who is a skilled writer rather than a philosopher, student, mail-bomber, or propagandist.

If we agree that it is a desirable goal to expose more people to anti-civilization ideas we have to agree that we cannot control the mechanisms by which this happens, and we have to accept that

political (as in specifically anarchist) anti-civilization arguments carry a double burden that just isn't for everyone. Footnotes make for compelling arguments for some, not all, readers. Jensen isn't a writer of literature, or one whose works are particularly dense, but he is readable for an American audience. You can pick up one of his books, read two (or two hundred) pages and put it back down. For many readers this ability to interact with the text on an ad hoc basis corresponds nicely to a short attention span. You do not have to set aside hours of time to get something out of *endgame*. There is enough repetition to guarantee you will catch the salient points.

That said, this book did not need to be nine hundred pages. If the goal was to produce a jargon-free book presenting the case against civilization and the methods by which civilization will be defeated, the book could have been one hundred pages and just as — if not more — powerful. Several years ago during a presentation, Jensen was talking about why he was working with the publisher Chelsea Green rather than a more mainstream publisher and he made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that the fact that CG did not cut down his page count was a central issue for him. At the time Jensen took his page count as a matter of pride. The author (vain and persnickety) is in struggle with the ideas that he is presenting.

It goes without saying the Jensen believes that destroying dams is a necessary precondition to saving (or reviving) the salmon population. He has said this several times during every presentation he has given and in past books. In *endgame* he devotes several hundred pages to this uncontroversial idea. This is Jensen at his worst: repeating for effect ad nauseam. At his best — which we see quite a bit of in *endgame* — he is a politically motivated journalist who skillfully steers great interviews. One of the best examples of this is provided in Volume 2, where he shares the result of his attempts to query fishery biologists on the question of the long term effects of destroying dams:

I'm wondering if you can be very explicit about the damage caused to rivers by catastrophic dam failure, whether that failure is

anthropogenic or natural. What are both short-term and long-term effects? How will the river be one day afterward, one year, one decade, fifty years, one hundred years? Are there gold-standard studies that have been done on this? To be clear: I want to know what precisely is the damage done by catastrophic dam failure. (627)

The responses, as you might suspect, reflect the dilemmas of many trapped wage-earners who chain a passion into a career and suffer for it the rest of their lives. Many of Jensen's respondents were entirely willing to talk about the life-cycle of rivers and about the specific details and time frames by which dams should be removed. Conclusion: Dams should go and here are the facts, or at least the people who have the facts, to prove it.

The argument at the core of Jensen's Twenty Premises (which comprise most of the first 500 pages of *endgame*) can be paraphrased thus: *Civilization is not sustainable, cannot be redeemed, and was created, and is maintained, by violence. To end civilization we (the great We) will have to resist it, probably by violent means.* Those who prefer Marx to Abbey would probably frame the problem as being one of Capitalism, others would possibly call the problem one of Power, but Jensen's critique is familiar to his readers. It is modern romanticism informed by the armed struggle groups of the sixties and seventies and by the deep ecology movement. It is primarily directed at a perceived (liberal) audience and isn't so much a scholarly defense of his Premises as a presentation of a particular perspective, arguing for a certain set of actions. This perspective — that there is something worth naming called Civilization and it is a problem, that violence will be involved in the solution, and that the material (rather than spiritual) world is primary — is a challenge to one who hasn't heard the perspective before and doesn't have their own set of terms to describe the problem and the solution.

His solution, on the other hand, never really materializes. Outside of talking specifically about river reclamation, the promise

of *endgame* as a manual for the end of civilization is never more specific than throwaway lines about resistance capped with statements like, "I'll leave the rest up to you." He ends up demonstrating that he is stuck in the same place that most radicals today are: the heart may be willing but the mind doesn't really have a clue about what to do.

If you believe him, and he does state the case frequently enough that it is hard to say that he doesn't believe himself, then the answer to our questions about what to do can be found from the earth directly. Literally. What does a stream desire? Sit next to it and listen to it. It will find a way to tell you. Have a problem with coyote eating your chickens? Talk to them about it. Many radical and liberal commentators sneer at Jensen's perceived spiritual arguments. They call the lack of objective verifiability "mysticism." They dismiss the similarity of Jensen's arguments to native arguments as saying more about his attraction toward natives than the reasonableness of his arguments.

And they have a point. Jensen is a west coast environmental writer, not a redneck pissed off about the destruction of the only thing he knows, nor a traditionalist living in reservation squalor. When Jensen writes about his first-hand experiences (and successes) talking to the earth, it reads like other New Age authors speaking about the same subjects. But guilt by association should work both ways.

If we want to blame Jensen on the one hand for seeming like a well educated cosmopolitan liberal who is in touch with the earth, we have to accept that he is also echoing people with unquestionable links to life-ways that did converse with Wakantanka and that did not separate themselves from the food they ate, the ground they walked on, etc. Spiritual beliefs are a consistently difficult thing to present to a secular audience that has understandably negative reactions to the Abrahamic religions. This difficulty is apparent even in Jensen's writing, which takes a utilitarian perspective on the topic. He says "if you want to know what the earth wants, you

listen to it," not "you should practice a lifeway that entails these rituals, includes these social roles, and practices these rites."

How does the secular world express strong feelings of affinity and disgust, anger and despair? It appears that expression of feelings is delegated to politicians, to the media, or perhaps to a blog. Jensen is trying to make a break from this kind of mediation through his writing. Perhaps the question merits asking whether writing itself is a secular kind of detachment, but the effort is clearly there. Talking to a stream about what it desires is a very different political practice than saying that one should have an *unmediated personal connection to the natural world* without any particular advice about how one would have it. In a world of utter atomization and isolation, what arguments can we really have with someone's expression of a connection that they truly have? The secular world doesn't have a response to this human need and for all of its derision against traditional, spiritual, and even religious practices, fails entirely at satisfying the needs of anyone who doesn't believe in the secular program.

Jensen is not an anarcho-primitivist and this book is not the expected manifesto on the topic. Instead Jensen mixes the identity politics of Audre Lorde, the pro-guerrilla methods of Ward Churchill, and the critique of civilization from John Zerzan to popularize these ideas for an audience that would not be able to access them otherwise. In the argument between the medium and the message, it is possible to see Jensen's ideas as being compromised by his style, but it is his style that has attracted attention to him in the first place. Few authors can successfully convince their readers to pay to read chapters of their book while they are writing them, few environmental authors are attracting crowds outside of green business seminars, and few popular authors treat anarchists with enough respect in their pages to be confused for one.