

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



No Way Out?

John Zerzan

2003

John Zerzan
No Way Out?
2003

Retrieved on March 19th, 2009 from www.johnzerzan.net

en.anarchistlibraries.net

Agriculture ended a vast period of human existence largely characterized by freedom from work, non-exploitation of nature, considerable gender autonomy and equality, and the absence of organized violence. It takes more from the earth than it puts back and is the foundation of private property. Agriculture encloses, controls, exploits, establishes hierarchy and resentment. Chellis Glendinning (1994) described agriculture as the “original trauma” that has devastated the human psyche, social life, and the biosphere.

But agriculture/domestication didn't suddenly appear out of nowhere, 10,000 years ago. Quite possibly, it was the culmination of a very slow acceptance of division of labor or specialization that began in earnest in Upper Paleolithic times, about 40,000 years ago. This process is behind what Horkheimer and Adorno termed “instrumental reason” in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although still touted as the precondition for “objectivity,” human reason is no longer neutral. It has somehow become deformed, with devastating impact: our reason imprisons our true humanity, while destroying the natural world. How else to account for the fact that human activity has become so inimical to humans, as well as to all other earthly species? Something had already started to take us in a neg-

ative direction before agriculture, class stratification, the State, and industrialism institutionalized its wrongness.

This disease of reason, which interprets reality as an amalgamation of instruments, resources, and means, adds an unprecedented and uncontrolled measure of domination. As with technology, which is reason's incarnation or materiality at any given time, reason's "neutrality" was missing from the start. Meanwhile, we are taught to accept our condition. It's "human nature" to be "creative," goes part of the refrain.

Division of labor gives effective power to some, while narrowing or reducing the scope of all. This can be seen in the production of art as well as in technological innovation. The distinctive work of individual masters is apparent in the earliest cave art, and craft specialization is an essential aspect of the later development of "complex" (aka stratified) societies. Specified roles facilitated a qualitative rupture with long-standing human social patterns, in a remarkably short period of time. After two or three million years of an egalitarian foraging (aka hunter-gatherer) mode of existence, in only 10,000 years, the rapid descent into a civilized lifeway. Since then, an ever-accelerating course of social and ecological destructiveness in every sphere of life.

It's also remarkable how complete the experience of civilization was from its very first stages. K. Aslihan Yener's *Domestication of Metal* (2000) discusses complex industry in civilization's opening act, the Early Bronze Age. She charts the organization and management of tin mining and smelting in Anatolia beginning in 8,000 BC. The archaeological evidence shows irrefutably that erosion, pollution, and deforestation were very significant consequences, as the earliest civilizations laid waste to much of the Middle East.

With civilization, how it is is how it's always been. Russell Hoban's 1980 novel, *Riddley Walker*, provides keen insight into the logic of civilization. What some call Progress, the narrator identifies as Power:

be met by a resolute autonomy and refusal that looks at the whole span of human presence and rejects all dimensions of captivity and destruction.

“It come to me then I know it Power dint go away. It ben and it wer and it wud be. It wer there and drawing. Power want it you to come to it with Power. Power wantit what ever cud happen to happen. Power wantit every thing moving frontways.”

The nature of the civilization project was clear from the beginning. As the swiftly arriving product of agriculture, the intensification of domination has been steady and sure. It's telling that humans' first monuments coincide with the first signs of domestication (R. Bradley in Mithers, 1998). The sad linearity of civilization's destruction of the natural world has been interrupted only by symptoms of self-destruction in the social sphere, in the form of wars. And when we recall with B.D. Smith (1995) that domestication is “the creation of a new form of plant and animal,” it becomes obvious that genetic engineering and cloning are anything but strange aberrations from the norm.

The contrast with thousands of generations of forager (hunter-gatherer) life is staggering. There is no dispute that these ancestors put sharing at the center of their existence. Throughout the anthropological literature, sharing and equality are synonymous with the forager social organization, characterized as bands of fifty or fewer people. In the absence of mediation or political authority, people enjoyed strong expressive bonds face-to-face with one another and in intimacy with nature.

Hewlett and Lamb (2000) explored the levels of trust and compassion in an Aka band of foragers in central Africa. The physical and emotional closeness between Aka children and adults, they concluded, is closely related to their benign orientation to the world. Conversely, Aka people see their environment as generous and supportive, at least in part, because of the unrestricted bonds among themselves. Colin Turnbull observed a very similar reality among the Mbuti in Africa, who addressed greetings to “Mother Forest, Father Forest.”

Agriculture is the founding model for all the systematic authoritarianism that followed, certainly including capitalism, and initiating the subjugation of women. Very early farming settlements contained “as many as 400 people” (Mithen et al, 2000). We know that expanding population was not a cause of agriculture but its result; this suggests a basic dynamic of the population problem. It appears that societies organized on a truly human scale fell victim to the exigencies of domestication. It may be that we can only solve the planet’s overpopulation problem by removing the root cause of basic estrangement from one another. With the advent of domestication, reproduction was not only rewarded economically; it also offered a compensation or consolation for so much that had been eradicated by civilization.

Amid the standardizing, disciplinary effects of today’s systems of technology and capital, we are subjected to an unprecedented barrage of images and other representations. Symbols have largely crowded out everything real and direct, both in the daily round of interpersonal interactions and in the accelerating extinction of nature. This state of affairs is generally accepted as inevitable, especially since received wisdom dictates that symbol-making is the cardinal, defining quality of a human being. We learn as children that all behavior, and culture itself, depend on symbol manipulation; this characteristic is what separates us from mere animals.

But a close look at Homo over our many, many millennia challenges the inexorability or “naturalness” of the dominance of symbols in our lives today. New discoveries are making newspaper headlines with increasing frequency. Archaeologists are finding that more than a million years ago, humans were as intelligent as ourselves — despite the fact that the earliest evidence to date of symbolic activity (figurines, cave art, ritual artifacts, time recordings, etc.) date to only 40,000 years ago or so. People used fire for cooking 1.9 million years ago; and built and sailed seagoing vessels at least 800,000 years ago!

human life has existed outside representation, and nothing definitively precludes humans from living that way again — however devoutly the postmodernists, in their accommodation to the system, may pray that this just cannot be.

The ultimate in representation is the current “society of the spectacle” described so vividly by Guy Debord. We now consume the image of living; life has passed into the stage of its representation, as spectacle. At the same time that technology offers virtual reality to the individual, the ensemble of electronic media creates a virtual community, an advanced symbolic state of passive consumption and learned helplessness.

But the balance sheet for the ruling order shows a mixed forecast. For one thing, representation in the political sector is met with skepticism and apathy similar to that evinced by representation in general. Has there ever been so much incessant yammer about democracy, and less real interest in it? To represent or be represented is a degradation, a reduction, both in the sense of symbolic culture and in terms of power.

Democracy, of course, is a form of rule. Partisans of anarchy should know this, though leftists have no problem with governance. Anarcho-syndicalists and other classical anarchists fail to question any of the more fundamental institutions, such as division of labor, domestication, domination of nature, Progress, technological society, etc.

To quote *Ridley Walker* again, as an antidote: “I cud feal some thing growing in me it wer like a grean sea surging in me it wer saying, *lose it*. Saying, *let go*. Saying, *the onlyes power is no power*.” The heart of anarchy.

Heidegger, in *Discourse on Thinking*, counseled that an attitude of “openness to the mystery” promises “a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it.” An anti-authoritarian orientation does not consist of this passive attitude, of changing only our consciousness. Instead, technology and its accomplice, culture, must

anarchy must embrace the community of living beings, and in this sense takes a step toward re-awakening this awareness.

Did humans lose the awareness of belonging to an earthly community of living beings with the advent of domestication, division of labor, and agriculture? The construction of monuments and the beginnings of animal and human sacrifice would tend to support this hypothesis. Characteristically, the scapegoated victim is held responsible for communal misfortune and suffering, while the fundamental reasons for the community's loss go unrecognized and unmitigated. Ritual involves "enormous amounts of energy" (Knight in Dunbar, Knight and Power, 1999); it is usually loud, multimediated, emotional, and redundant, testifying to the felt depth of the underlying crisis.

The movement from animism to ritual parallels the transformation of small, face-to-face groups into large, complex societies. Culture takes over, with specialized professionals in charge of the realm of the sacred. The longing for that original feeling of communion with other beings and egalitarian intimacy with one's fellow humans can never be appeased by ritual activities developed within a hierarchical social system. This tendency culminates in the teachings of transcendent religions, that since the meaning of our lives has nothing to do with life on earth, we should pin our hopes on a heavenly reward. Conversely, as with the Aka and Mbuti described above, feelings of oneness with the earth and all its inhabitants, and a sense of the joy and meaningfulness of existence, seem to flourish when we humans live in egalitarian, face-to-face groups.

Returning to language, an agreed-upon banality is that reality is always inherently disclosed through language — that in fact reality is decisively mediated by language. Postmodernism ups this ante in two ways. Because language is basically a self-referential system, PM avers, language cannot really involve meaning. Further, there is only language (as there is only civilization); there is no escape from a world defined by language games (and domestication). But archaeological and ethnographic evidence shows clearly that

These people must have been very intelligent; yet they left no tangible trace of symbolic thought until relatively recently. Likewise, although our ancestors of a million years ago had the I.Q. to enslave each other and destroy the planet, they refrained from doing so, until symbolic culture got going. Civilization advocates are making a concerted effort to find evidence of symbol use at a much earlier time, paralleling the unsuccessful effort in recent decades to locate evidence that would overturn the new anthropological paradigm of pre-agricultural harmony and well being. So far, their searches have not borne fruit.

There is an enormous time gap between clear signs of mental capacity and clear signs of any symbolizing at all. This discrepancy casts serious doubt on the adequacy of a definition of humans as essentially symbol makers. The apparent congruence between the beginnings of representation and the beginnings of what is unhealthy about our species seems even more important. Basic questions pretty much formulate themselves.

One such question concerns the nature of representation. Foucault argued that representation always involves a power relation. There may be a connection between representation and the power imbalance that is created when division of labor takes over human activity. In a similar vein, it is difficult to see how large social systems could have come about in the absence of symbolic culture. At a minimum, they appear to be inseparable.

Jack Goody (1997) referred to "the continuing pressure to represent." Along with an easily identified impulse to communicate, is there not also something much less positive going on? For all those generations before civilization, folks did many things with their minds — including communicating — but they didn't get symbolic about it. To re-present reality involves a move to a complete, closed system, of which language is the most obvious example and perhaps the original instance. Whence this will to create systems, to name and to count? Why this dimension that looks suspiciously like instrumental reason, with its essentially dominating core?

Language is routinely portrayed as a natural and inevitable part of our evolution. Like division of labor, ritual, domestication, religion? Complete the progression and we see that the end of the biosphere and total alienation are likewise “natural” and “inevitable.” Whether or not there can be a way out of the symbolic order is the pressing question.

“In the beginning was the Word” — the convening of the symbolic domain. After Eden’s freedom was revoked, Adam named the animals and the names *were* the animals. In the same way, Plato held that the word *creates* the thing. There is a moment of linguistic agreement, and from then on a categorized frame is imposed on all phenomena. This pact attempts to override the “original sin” of language, which is the separation of speech and world, words and things.

Many languages start out rich in verbs, but are gradually undone by the more common imperialism of the noun. This parallels the movement to a steadily more reified world, focusing on objects and goals at the expense of process. In similar fashion, the vivid naturalism of cave art gives way to an impoverished, stylized aesthetic. In both cases, the symbolic deal is sweetened by the promise of an enticing richness, but in each case the long-term results are deadly. Symbolic modes may begin with some freshness and vitality, but eventually reveal their actual poverty, their inner logic.

The innate sensual acuity of human infants steadily atrophies as they grow and develop in interaction with a symbolic culture that continues to infiltrate and monopolize most aspects of our lives. A few remnants of the unmediated, the direct still survive. Lovemaking, close relationships, immersion in wild nature, and the experience of birth and death awaken our senses and our intelligence, stimulating an unaccustomed hunger. We long for something other than the meager, artificial world of re-presentation, with its second-hand pallor.

Communication remains open to those invigorating flashes that pass, nonverbally, between people. All the crabbed, crimped, condi-

tioned channels might be chucked, because we can’t live on what’s available. As levels of pain, loss, and emptiness rise, the reigning apparatus pumps out ever more unsatisfying, unsustainable lies.

Referring to telepathy, Sigmund Freud wrote in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, “One is led to a suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication.” Enculturated down to his toes, Freud didn’t celebrate this suspicion, and seemed to fear the life force that accompanied such non-cultural dynamics. Laurens van der Post (e.g. *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, 1958) related several firsthand observations of telepathic communication, over considerable distances, among the people who used to be called “Bushmen.” M. Pobers and Richard St. Barbe Baker, also writing in the 1950s, witnessed telepathy by indigenous people before they were colonized by civilization. I mention this in passing as one glimpse of the reality of the non-symbolic, a direct connection that actually existed not long ago, and that could be revived amid the ruins of representation.

Language and art may have originally appeared and united in ritual, a cultural innovation intended to bridge a new separation between people and their world. The term “animism” is often used, dismissively or even pejoratively, to describe the belief that non-human beings and even objects are inhabited by “spirits.” Just as the term “anarchism” is a summary description of anarchy, a pervasive viewpoint or state of being that rejects hierarchy, “animism” fails to capture the transformative quality of a shared awareness. In the case of anarchy, there is an awareness that living in equality with other humans necessitates the rejection of all forms of domination, including leadership and political representation. “Animism” refers to the extension of that awareness to other life forms and even to “inanimate” dwellers on the planet such as rocks, clouds, and rivers. The fact that there is no word related to animism, analogous to anarchy, is an index of how distanced we are from this awareness, in our present state. Green anarchy explicitly states that