

# Running on Emptiness (Book Review)

Marcel Idels

21 June 2002

*Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization*, by John Zerzan, Feral House Publishing, 2002, [www.feralhouse.com](http://www.feralhouse.com).

On the cover of *Running on Emptiness*, Derrick Jensen writes, "John Zerzan is the most important philosopher of our time. All the rest of us are building on his foundation—of unmaking civilization." Jensen's contribution to the book is a 27-page interview he did in 1998 where we get to know Zerzan the person in a relaxed conversational dialogue.

Zerzan has been a prolific writer on anarcho-primitivism, the problems of technology, the pathology of our modern culture and the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski.

He spent 30 tumultuous years traversing radicalism in the US. Down and out for several years in the late '70s, Zerzan got back into writing when a friend told him, "I don't think the term revolution has meaning anymore."

*Running on Emptiness* is an accumulation of his talent and persistence. The world is catching up with Zerzan, and his writings assume new poignancy.

A tonic or a poison? Some of it is not easy reading. As Chellis Glendinning says, the book is "brilliant, stark, challenging, timely—a deliberate and delicious foreplay to nothing less than the erasure of civilization itself."

Whatever you think, you'll be impressed by the vast array of insight and reference that Zerzan uses to plow through chapters on "The Failure of Symbolic Logic and Thought," "Time and Its Discontents" (worth the price of the book alone), "Against Technology," "Why I Hate Star Trek" and "Who is Chomsky?" Anarchist disregard for democracy is held back until the final page of the book.

Zerzan argues that in understanding the primitive past we take the first step toward rejecting the pathological present and actualizing a future primitive. His main point is that humans lived pleasantly for a million years until they turned weird due to language, art, religion and agriculture.

Anarchist primitivist thought and action are intentionally provocative. Aspiring to inform and enlighten with regard to anthropological and archeological knowledge, the primary purpose is to exhort and incite revolutionary social change.

I've thought a lot about how I can best serve—and I realize that at least part of this answer is based on class privilege, on a wider set of options being open to me than to many others—but for right now I'm OK with my form of resistance, which is through cultural critique. For me, words are a better weapon to bring down the system than a gun would be," writes Zerzan.

He cites many useful examples of how language, shamans, memory and especially technology have driven us into alienation from one another, nature and ourselves. When we removed ourselves from direct experience of the sensual world through language, time and reification (ascribing thing-ness to everything—acts, thoughts, feelings), he says, "We became less stimulated by our senses. The symbols for reality triumphed over the reality of experience itself, and we now consume the image of 'living.' Life has passed into the stage of its representation, a spectacle."

Following Jean Jacques Rousseau and Paul Shepard, Zerzan argues that civilization and our disconnecting from nature retards the potential for human development and enlightenment. Not wholly a pessimist he writes, "Anti-civilization currents are growing in response to the psychic immiseration that envelops us. Thus symbolic life, the essence of civilization, comes under fire."

The chapter on time is mesmerizingly easy to read. At the end of the chapter he asks, "Can we put an end to time? Its movements can be seen as the master and measure of a social existence that has become increasingly empty and technicized. Averse to all that is spontaneous and immediate, time more and more clearly reveals its bond with alienation. Divided life will be replaced by the possibility of living completely and wholly—timelessly—only when we erase the primary causes of that division: civilization."

Zerzan begins his analysis of technology with its social implications: "I live in Oregon, where the rate of suicide among teenagers has increased 600 percent since 1961." He writes, "I find it hard to see this as other than youth getting to the threshold of adulthood and society and looking out, and what do they see? They see this bereft place. We're seeing the crisis of our youth's inner nature, the prospects of complete dehumanization, linking up with the crisis of outer nature which is obviously ecological catastrophe... and it's so greatly urged along by the movement of technology."

Zerzan covers a wide array of history and subject matter. As you become familiar with his terminology, the reading gets easier, more compelling and draws one into reflection and discovery. These are the issues of our lives and times. And they are the issues that are so hard to find information on, so hard to talk to anyone about.

My question is: What good is it?

*Running on Emptiness* makes the possibility of real change seemingly impossible, since to get all the way to a non-symbolic world is far more difficult than to get to an ecologically sustainable world (be it socialist, agrarian or post-apocalyptic). The goal of a primitive existence is ultimately worthy, but the goal is no more the tactic in this scenario than it is with recycling or food co-ops. Everywhere people hide in lifestyle delusions thinking that somehow the "big change" will happen everywhere peacefully, with little suffering and not much effort.

There is little in this book which is of use for the revolution that must happen. Nor is there enough on the transition to primitivism after the revolution—the period when armed masses could destroy the environment faster than industrialists did.

---

*A much longer version of this book review was originally published at [www.bluegreenearth.com](http://www.bluegreenearth.com).*

*Marcel Idels is a prolific, anonymous, pseudonymous writer on the topics that delineate cutting-edge radical warnings and prescriptions ranging from phony drug wars to the "Third Bush Coup" and the imminent military takeover of the world. He lives in northern California when not on a rescue mission against the lies of the Empire.*

The Ted K Archive

Marcel Idels  
Running on Emptiness (Book Review)  
21 June 2002

Earth First! Journal 22, no. 6 (21 June  
2002).<[environmentandsociety.org/node/7069](http://environmentandsociety.org/node/7069)>

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**