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Duncan Campbell

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2001

John Zerzan doesn't have a car, a credit card or a computer. He lives a quiet life in a cabin in Oregon and has sold his own blood plasma to make ends meet. So why does corporate America think he is the Antichrist? Duncan Campbell meets an improbable guru.

John Zerzan is sweeping the porch of his small cabin-style home in the university town of Eugene, Oregon. It is a glorious, spring, cherry blossom day, and it is hard to imagine that the slight, bearded soul in khaki shorts and a T-shirt bearing the legend "What goes up must come down" is really the bete noire of technology and capitalism, the man regarded by the Wall Street Journal as a cross between Fagin and the Antichrist.

Zerzan is an anarchist author who believes that our culture is on a death march and that technology in all its forms must be resisted. He corresponds and sympathises with Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. He believes that civilisation has been a failure and that the system is fast collapsing, and he has been blamed by some for the mayhem at the Battle of Seattle in 1999. This weekend, when it hosts the Free Trade Area of the Americas talks, Quebec City becomes the latest magnet for international protest and a focus for many who are attracted to Zerzan's views.

Zerzan seems puzzled by the attention that he and his beliefs, encapsulated in his books *Future Primitive* and *Elements of Refusal*, are now receiving. The spotlight first shone on him in 1997 when it emerged that he had visited the Unabomber in jail and that the two shared many beliefs. Kaczynski is serving three life sentences for mail-bomb murders over a 17-year period and is now in a maximum-security prison in Florence, 100 miles south of Denver.

"Unless the revolution gets there, he's there for ever," says Zerzan. "He is in very restricted quarters. For one who found his happiness in nature, you've got to assume that it's awfully hard to live that way. Will there be other Kaczynskis? I hope not. I think that activity came out of isolation and desperation, and I hope that isn't going to be something that people feel they have to take up because they have no other way to express their opposition to the brave new world."

Interest in Zerzan and his own opposition to that brave new world intensified after Seattle and will doubtless do so again if there is trouble in Quebec City this weekend, although he will not be there personally.

“We got some some credit — or notoriety — over Seattle and a number of us were there, but it’s not our priority to be dashing around. I think the question now is whether mass street protests have a big future. Will we go through the ritual of these pre-planned situations in the streets where people get arrested or should we put our energy elsewhere?”

Of Czech origin on both sides of his family, Zerzan grew up in Salem, Oregon. He took degrees in political science at Stanford and history at San Francisco State, then, after a stint as an organiser with a union of social services employees, took postgraduate studies at the University of Southern California. He was active in conventional leftwing politics and was arrested in 1966 for demonstrating against the Vietnam war.

Nearly 20 years ago he moved north to Eugene, which has since become something of an anarchist stronghold, with fierce battles fought against gentrification and development. In June 1999, not long before Seattle, a march following a two-day anarchist conference in Eugene led to a bloody riots and arrests. One anarchist was jailed for seven years for assaulting police with a rock.

As one would expect there is no car outside Zerzan’s home — he cycles. There are no credit cards in his wallet, nor computers on his desk. He has financed his writing by selling his own blood plasma, but now makes his living doing odd jobs and babysitting. He is working on a “mini memoir”. His books are accessible, his frames of reference encompassing everyone from Robert Louis Stevenson and William Morris to Jean Baudrillard and Euclid.

He does volunteer work with disabled people in the weights rooms of the local YMCA and has a programme on KWVA, the local campus station, on which he plays everything from classical to hip hop. He lives in a housing cooperative, of which he is currently the president: “I get a lot of grief for that — ‘Mr Anarchist President’.” He was married and has a daughter, whose picture sits on a shelf in his modest front room with its chess board and shelves of books.

Zerzan has been described by critics as one of those anarchists who “carry a black flag in one hand and a welfare cheque in the other”, to which he replies that he doesn’t know anyone on welfare. He is also often portrayed as part of the “hunter-gatherer” wing of anarchism, so how would he describe his views?

what relevance does all the theory really have for someone living in the middle of Detroit or east Los Angeles?

“It’s a huge challenge,” Zerzan admits. “You’ve got these great grandiose ideas, but the rubber has to hit the road somewhere, and we know that. I don’t know how that’s going to work.” He cites small movements such as Food not Bombs, guerrilla gardening and Cafe Anarchista, and praises magazines such as *Adbusters*, *Anarchy Magazine*, *Fifth Estate* and the *Earth First Journal*.

“But we are a long way from connecting with that reality and we have to face that. You start off with questioning things and trying to enlarge the space where people can have dialogue and raise the questions that are not being raised anywhere else. But we don’t have blueprints as to what people should do.”

He is not alone in his disquiet. Last year, in a fascinating treatise in *Wired*, Bill Joy, the co-founder of Sun Microsystems, one of whose friends was a victim of Kaczynski, said that although he believed that the Unabomber’s actions had been criminally insane, there had been some merit in the case he made against a headlong technological rush to the future. He and Zerzan have since corresponded.

Zerzan comes to the porch to bid farewell. A cat is chasing a squirrel. The squirrel escapes. “They always get away,” says Zerzan admiringly as the untamed, free-spirited creature runs rings around its domesticated pursuer.

“It’s the effort to understand and do away with every form of domination, and that involves questioning very basic institutions, including the division of labour and domestication upon which the whole edifice of civilisation and technology rests . . . If you took away division of labour and domestication you might have something pretty close to what obtained for the first two million years of the species, during which there was leisure time, there was quite a lot of gender equality and no organised violence — which doesn’t sound too bad. They say: ‘Oh, you want to be a caveman.’ Well, maybe that’s somewhat true.”

He says that he got used to “the whole primitivist thing” being used in quotation marks and that it makes him cringe. “Now I guess the quotes are off, but all of these labels seem like the same old ‘I’m a this and I’m a that’. In America it’s very, very popular to be ‘anti-ideological’. Everyone says: ‘Oh, I’m not ideological.’ When Americans say they’re not ideological, it just means they accept the basic system or that they’re not political.”

Some of the protesters at Seattle took issue with Zerzan and the young, black-clad Eugene anarchists who smashed windows. One liberal Seattle commentator said he would have spat in Zerzan’s face after the riots if he had seen him because the wrecked shop fronts had detracted from the main business of closing down the World Trade Organisation talks. Zerzan replies: “It took Seattle to break the ice. The fact that people got out there and rumbled. You can hold up signs at demos and little rallies and that’ll do nothing. I wish good ideas would just wonderfully work their magic but good ideas are worth nothing if you can’t back it up.”

But it is specifically his voicing of opposition to new technologies that has brought him prominence, with detractors and admirers. “The idea of technology being a neutral, discreet thing and whoever is in charge can use it this way or that way, that’s really missing the point. It’s inseparable from the system, it’s the incarnation of the system and it’s always been that way. You can’t take a totally alienating technology and use it for anything except more alienation, more destructive impact on every level from the psyche to the rest of the biosphere. Globalisation is a kind of buzz word at the moment and once again the lefties have come up with a soft core thing. Globalisation is nothing new; what’s happening now is just the latest round of excesses.”

Zerzan says he objects to being portrayed as someone leading an army of young anarchists into battle. “People think I’m trying to push everybody into wild stuff but I’m more worried about people staying out of jail. This is not a game. There has been some heavy stuff already and there will be more.” He always disagreed with Kaczynski on the issue of violence against living creatures and says that the same is true of his fellow anarchists in Eugene and of the Earth Liberation Front, which has recently been burning down properties built as part of an urban sprawl. “Property destruction as a tactic is a totally different thing and we’re way in favour of that, but that is not violence.”

But if Zerzan has been the butt of attacks from the conservative media, he also has few friends on the organised left. “One of my pet peeves is that the left shows no interest in these things. It deserves to go extinct. It is never going to extend or deepen its critique and that’s fine with me because it’s kind of an albatross and it’s failed so deeply.”

He does not, he says, “throw out all of Marx, the class struggle, all that we take for granted”. But he includes in his condemnation “liberals, Marxists, members of left parties, Noam Chomsky, the anarchist left, the syndicalists, the Wobblies, all those people who think technology is fine and it just depends on how you use it and that there’s nothing wrong with development and the industrial system, it just depends who’s running it.”

He is aware of the contradiction of a movement that despises hierarchies having one figure who is becoming as prominent as he is. “I’m not handling this well – if you have one person all over the place that really is in contradiction to the anarchy idea, so we’re trying to get away from that, but here we are! I’m always speaking for myself – I’m not speaking for all anarchists.”

But is it not the case that much of the protest movement now is fuelled by communication on the internet in a way that would otherwise be impossible? “That’s another of the contradictions. It is true, for example, that many more people have read my stuff [on the internet] than have bought the books, and that’s fine . . . Many people I know do use it for instant communication, for coordinating things. You can get anarchist news daily in 12 languages on what is going on today in Greece or wherever and that is an obvious service. I don’t even have a

computer, but I think you can use it without succumbing to it.” He does have a television set, and contributes to the underground Radio Free Cascadia and cable access shows. “Everyone needs to veg out at times and television’s not as bad as hard drugs.”

There is an ongoing debate, he says, about whether one should even bother talking to the media. Three years earlier, he says, the *Wall Street Journal* had come to Eugene and talked to everybody, including the parents of many of the younger anarchists, and had then written “the most scurrilous, inaccurate article. I still marvel at it. All false stuff about how these kids were all runaways and how they were going to set bombs, just nutty stuff . . . Some people wouldn’t talk to you or anyone from the straight media, just wouldn’t do it. Some of us argue that people can read between the lines and if they cut the thing or if it’s somewhat spun, people understand.”

He has recently been in Europe, in Spain and England, and the trip has enthused him. “More and more people are ready for some movement that is pitched at a deeper level. I was kind of surprised at how many people wanted to talk about Seattle . . . I don’t want to dwell on Seattle and yet that was an inspiring thing around the world, the opening battle of a new movement, so to speak.”

He sees the spate of school shootings and the the vast increase in teenage suicides in America as a sign of a system reaching breaking point: “There are even higher incidents of homicide at work; that didn’t happen when I was a kid. My dad was an NRA [National Rifle Association] lifetime kind of guy and we had all kinds of guns in our house, but no one dreamed of taking a gun to school . . . Travelling around, boy, I think people are so fed up with things. On the train last August I was overhearing all kinds of things. People were talking about how bugged they are – they’ve got their beepers and their cellphones, they don’t have a second’s rest any more – and these were just straight people.” He abhors what he sees as a world in which much of someone’s day is spent gazing through a screen – a TV screen, a computer screen, a car windscreen.

But while it is not hard to imagine returning to utopian simplicity on a gorgeous day in Eugene, where the Red Barn Organic Grocery noticeboard offers handmade moccasins and didgeridoo sound therapy,