

John Zerzan

Seize the Day

2006

The rapidly mounting toll of modern life is worse than we could have imagined. A metamorphosis rushes onward, changing the texture of living, the whole feel of things. In the not-so-distant past this was still only a partial modification; now the Machine converges on us, penetrating more and more to the core of our lives, promising no escape from its logic.

The only stable continuity has been that of the body, and that has become vulnerable in unprecedented ways. We now inhabit a culture, according to Furedi (1997), of high anxiety that borders on a state of outright panic. Postmodern discourse suppresses articulations of suffering, a facet of its accommodation to the inevitability of further, systematic desolation. The prominence of chronic degenerative diseases makes a chilling parallel with the permanent erosion of all that is healthy and life-affirming inside industrial culture. That is, maybe the disease can be slowed a bit in its progression, but no overall cure is imaginable in this context — which created the condition in the first place.

As much as we yearn for community, it is all but dead. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears (*American Sociological Review* 2006) tell us that 19 years ago, the typical American had three close friends; now the number is two. Their national study also reveals that over this period of time, the number of people without one friend or confidant has tripled. Census figures show a correspondingly sharp rise in single-person households, as the technoculture — with its vaunted “connectivity” — grows steadily more isolating, lonely and empty.

In Japan “people simply aren’t having sex” (Kitamura 2006) and the suicide rate has been rising rapidly. *Hikikomori*, or self-isolation, finds over a million young people staying in their rooms for years. Where the technoculture is most developed, levels of stress, depression and anxiety are highest.

Questions and ideas can only become currents in the world insofar as reality, external and internal, makes that possible. Our present state, devolving toward catastrophe, displays a reality in unmistakable terms. We are bound for a head-on collision between urgent new questions and a totality — global civilization — that can provide no answers. A world that offers no future, but shows no signs of admitting this fact, imperils its own future along with the life, health, and freedom of all beings on the planet. Civilization’s rulers have always squandered whatever remote chances they had to prepare for the end of life as they know it, by choosing to ride the crest of domination, in all its forms.

It has become clear to some that the depth of the expanding crisis, which is as massively dehumanizing as it is ecocidal, stems from the cardinal institutions of civilization itself. The discredited promises of Enlightenment and modernity represent the pinnacle of the grave mistake known as civilization. There is no prospect that this Order will renounce that which has defined and maintained it, and apparently little likelihood that its various ideological supporters can face the

facts. If civilization's collapse has already begun, a process now unofficially but widely assumed, there may be grounds for a widespread refusal or abandonment of the reigning totality. Indeed, its rigidity and denial may be setting the stage for a cultural shift on an unprecedented scale, which could unfold rapidly.

Of course, a paradigm shift away from this entrenched, but vulnerable and fatally flawed system is far from unavoidable. The other main possibility is that too many people, for the usual reasons (fear, inertia, manufactured incapacity, etc.) will passively accept reality as it is, until it's too late to do anything but try to deal with collapse. It's noteworthy that a growing awareness that things are going wrong, however inchoate and individualized, is fuelled by a deep, visceral unease and in many cases, acute suffering. This is where opportunity resides. From this new perspective that is certainly growing, we find the work of confronting what faces us as a species, and removing the barriers to planetary survival. The time has come for a wholesale indictment of civilization and mass society. It is at least possible that, in various modes, such a judgment can undo the death-machine before destruction and domestication inundate everything.

Although what's gone before helps us understand our current plight, we now live in obvious subjection, on a plainly greater scale than heretofore. The enveloping techno-world that is spreading so rapidly suggests movement toward even deeper control of every aspect of our lives. Adorno's assessment in the 1960s is proving valid today: "Eventually the system will reach a point — the word that provides the social cue is 'integration' — where the universal dependence of all moments on all other moments makes the talk of causality obsolete. It is idle to search for what might have been a cause within a monolithic society. Only that society itself remains the cause." (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 267).

A totality that absorbs every "alternative" and seems irreversible. Totalitarian. It is its own justification and ideology. Our refusal, our call to dismantle all this, is met with fewer and fewer countervailing protests or arguments. The bottom-line response is more along the lines of "Yes, your vision is good, true, valid; but this reality will never go away."

None of the supposed victories over inhumanity have made the world safer, not even just for our own species. All the revolutions have only tightened the hold of domination, by updating it. Despite the rise and fall of various political persuasions, it is always production that has won; technological systems never retreat, they only advance. We have been free or autonomous insofar as the Machine requires for its functioning.

Meanwhile, the usual idiotic judgments continue. "We should be free to use specific technologies as tools without adopting technology as lifestyle." (Valovic 2000). "The worlds created through digital technology are real to the extent that we choose to play their games." (Downs 2005).

Along with the chokehold of power, and some lingering illusions about how modernity works, the Machine is faced with worsening prospects. It is a striking fact that those who manage the dominant organization of life no longer even attempt answers or positive projections. The most pressing “issues” (e.g. Global Warming) are simply ignored, and propaganda about Community (the market plus isolation), Freedom (total surveillance society), the American Dream (!) is so false that it cannot be expected to be taken seriously.

As Sahlins pointed out (1977), the more complex societies become, the less they are able to cope with challenges. The central concern of any state is to preserve predictability; as this capacity visibly fails, so do that state’s chances of survival. When the promise of security wanes, so does the last real support. Many studies have concluded that various ecosystems are more likely to suffer sudden catastrophic collapse, rather than undergo steady, predictable degradation. The mechanisms of rule just might be subject to a parallel development.

In earlier times there was room to maneuver. Civilization’s forward movement was accompanied by a safety valve: the frontier. Large-scale expansion of the Holy Roman Empire eastward during the 12th-14th centuries, the invasion of the New World after 1500, the Westward movement in North America through the end of the 19th century. But the system becomes “mortgaged to structures accumulated along the way” (Sahlins again). We are hostages, and so is the whole hierarchical ensemble. The whole system is busy, always in flux; transactions take place at an ever-accelerating rate. We have reached the stage where the structure relies almost wholly on the co-optation of forces that are more or less outside its control. A prime example is the actual assistance given by leftist regimes in South America. The issue is not so much that of the outcome of neo-liberal economics, but of the success of the left in power at furthering self-managed capital, and co-opting indigenous resistance into its orbit.

But these tactics do not outweigh the fact of an overall inner rigidity that puts the future of techno-capital at grave risk. The name of the crisis is modernity itself, its contingent, cumulative weight. Any regime today is in a situation where every “solution” only deepens the engulfing problems. More technology and more coercive force are the only resources to fall back on. The “dark side” of progress stands revealed as the definitive face of modern times.

Theorists such as Giddens and Beck admit that the outer limits of modernity have been reached, so that disaster is now the latent characteristic of society. And yet they hold out hope, without predicating basic change, that all will be well. Beck, for instance, calls for a democratization of industrialism and technological change — carefully avoiding the question of why this has never happened.

There is no reconciliation, no happy ending within this totality, and it is transparently false to claim otherwise. History seems to have liquidated the possibility

of redemption; its very course undoes what has been passing as critical thought. The lesson is to notice how much must change to establish a new and genuinely viable direction. There never was a moment of choosing; the field or ground of life shifts imperceptibly in a multitude of ways, without drama, but to vast effect. If the solution were sought in technology, that would of course only reinforce the rule of modern domination; this is a major part of the challenge that confronts us.

Modernity has reduced the scope allowed for ethical action, cutting off its potentially effective outlets. But reality, forcing itself upon us as the crisis mounts, is becoming proximal and insistent once again. Thinking gnaws away at everything, because this situation corrodes everything we have wanted. We realize that it is up to us. Even the likelihood of a collapse of the global techno-structure should not lure us away from acknowledgement of our decisive potential roles, our responsibility to stop the engine of destruction. Passivity, like a defeated attitude, will not bring forth deliverance.

We are all wounded, and paradoxically, this estrangement becomes the basis for communality. A gathering of the traumatized may be forming, a spiritual kinship demanding recovery. Because we can still feel acutely, our rulers can rest no more easily than we do. Our deep need for healing means that an overthrow must take place. That alone would constitute healing. Things “just go on”, creating the catastrophe on every level. People are figuring it out: that things just go on is, in fact, the catastrophe.

Melissa Holbrook Pierson (*The Place You Love is Gone* 2006) expressed it this way: “Suddenly now it hits, bizarrely easy to grasp. We are inexorably heading for the Big Goodbye. It’s official! The unthinkable is ready to be thought. It is finally in sight, after all of human history behind us. In the pit of what is left of your miserable soul you feel it coming, the definitive loss of home, bigger than the cause of one person’s tears. Yours and mine, the private sob, will be joined by a mass crying . . .”

Misery. Immiseration. Time to get back to where we have never quite given up wanting to be. “Stretched and stretched again to the elastic limit at which it will bear no more,” in Spengler’s phrase.

Enlightenment thought, along with the Industrial Revolution, began in late 18th century Europe, inaugurating modernity. We were promised freedom based on conscious control over our destiny. But Enlightenment claims have not been realized, and the whole project has turned out to be self-defeating. Foundational elements including reason, universal rights and the laws of science were consciously designed to jettison pre-scientific, mystical sorts of knowledge. Diverse, communally sustained lifeways were sacrificed in the name of a unitary and uniform, law-enforced pattern of living. Kant’s emphasis on freedom through moral action is rooted in this context, along with the French encyclopedists’ program

to replace traditional crafts with more up-to-date technological systems. Kant, by the way, for whom property was sanctified by no less than his categorical imperative, favorably compared the modern university to an industrial machine and its products.

Various Enlightenment figures debated the pros and cons of emerging modern developments, and these few words obviously cannot do justice to the topic of Enlightenment. However, it may be fruitful to keep this important historical conjunction in mind: the nearly simultaneous births of modern progressive thought and mass production. Apt in this regard is the perspective of Min Lin (2001): “Concealing the social origin of cognitive discourses and the idea of certainty is the inner requirement of modern Western ideology in order to justify or legitimate its position by universalizing its intellectual basis and creating a new sacred quasi-transcendence.”

Modernity is always trying to go beyond itself to a different state, lurching forward as if to recover the equilibrium lost so long ago. It is bent on changing the future — even its own —

With modernity’s stress on freedom, modern enlightened institutions have in fact succeeded in nothing so much as conformity. Lyotard (1991) summed up the overall outcome: “A new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new poverty, merciless remodeling of opinion by media, immiseration of the mind, obsolescence of the soul.” Massified, standardizing modes, in every area of life, relentlessly re-enact the actual control program of modernity.

“Capitalism did not create our world; the machine did. Painstaking studies designed to prove the contrary have buried the obvious beneath tons of print.” (Ellul 1964). Which is not in any way to deny the centrality of class rule, but to remind us that divided society began with division of labor. The divided self led directly to divided society. The division of labor is the labor of division. Understanding what characterizes modern life can never be far from the effort to understand technology’s role in our everyday lives, just as it always has been. Lyotard (1991) judged that “technology wasn’t invented by humans. Rather the other way around.

Goethe’s *Faust*, the first tragedy about industrial development, depicted its deepest horrors as stemming from honorable aims. The superhuman developer Faust partakes of a drive endemic to modernization, one which is threatened by any trace of otherness/difference in its totalizing movement.

We function in an ever more homogeneous field, a ground always undergoing further uniformitization to promote a single, globalized techno-grid. Yet it is possible to avoid this conclusion by keeping one’s focus on the surface, on what is permitted to exist on the margins. Thus some see Indymedia as a crucial triumph of decentralization, and free software as a radical demand. This attitude ignores

the industrial basis of every high tech development and usage. All the “wondrous tools,” including the ubiquitous and very toxic cell phone, are more related to eco-disastrous industrialization in China and India, for example, than to the clean, slick pages of *Wired* magazine. The salvationist claims of *Wired* are incredible in their disconnected, infantile fantasies. Its adherents can only maintain such gigantic delusions by means of deliberate blindness not only to technology’s systematic destruction of nature, but to the global human cost involved: lives filled with toxicity, drudgery, and industrial accidents.

Now there are nascent protest phenomena against the all-encompassing universal system, such as “slow food,” “slow cities,” “slow roads”. People would prefer that the juggernaut give pause and not devour the texture of life. But actual degradation is picking up speed, in its deworlding, disembedding course. Only a radical break will impede its trajectory. More missiles and more nukes in more countries is obviously another part of the general movement of the technological imperative. The specter of mass death is the crowning achievement, the condition of modernity, while the posthuman is the coming techno-condition of the subject. We are the vehicle of the Megamachine, not its beneficiary, held hostage to its every new leap forward. The technohuman condition looms, indeed. Nothing can change until the technological basis is changed, is erased.

Our condition is reinforced by those who insist — in classic postmodern fashion — that nature/culture is a false binarism. The natural world is evacuated, paved over, to the strains of the surrender-logic that nature has always been cultural, always available for subjugation. Koert van Mensvoort’s “Exploring Next Nature” (2005) exposes the domination of nature logic, so popular in some quarters: “Our next nature will consist of what used to be cultural.” Bye-bye, non-engineered reality. After all, he blithely proclaims, nature changes with us.

This is the loss of the concept of nature altogether — and not just the concept! But the sign “nature” certainly enjoys popularity, as the substance is destroyed: “exotic” third world cultural products, natural ingredients in food, etc. Unfortunately, the nature of experience is linked to the experience of nature. When the latter is reduced to an insubstantial presence, the former is disfigured. Paul Berkett (2006) cites Marx and Engels to the effect that with communism people will “not only feel but also know their oneness with nature,” that communism is “the unity of being of man with nature.” Industrial-technological overcoming as its opposite — what blatant productionist rubbish. Leaving aside the communism orientation, however, how much of today’s Left disagrees with the marxian ode to mass production?

A neglected insight in Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* is the suggestion that a deep, unconscious “sense of guilt produced by civilization” causes a growing malaise and dissatisfaction. Adorno (1966) saw that relevant to “the catastrophe

that impends is the supposition of an irrational catastrophe in the beginning. Today the thwarted possibility of something other has shrunk to that of averting catastrophe in spite of everything.”

The original, qualitative, utter failure for life on this planet was the setting in motion of civilization. Enlightenment — like the Axial Age world religions 2000 years before — supplied transcendence for the next level of domination, an indispensable support for industrial modernity. But where would one now find the source of a transcending, justifying framework for new levels of rapacious development? What new realm of ideas and values can be conjured up to validate the all-encompassing ruin of late modernity? There is none. Only the system’s own inertia; no answers, and no future.

Meanwhile our context is that of a sociability of uncertainty. The moorings of day-to-day stability are being unfastened, as the system begins to show multiple weaknesses. When it can no longer guarantee security, its end is near.

Ours is an incomparable historical vantage point. We can easily grasp the story of this universal civilization’s malignancy. This understanding may be a signal strength for enabling a paradigm shift, the one that could do away with civilization and free us from the habitual will to dominate. A daunting challenge, to say the least; but recall the child who was moved to speak out in the face of collective denial. The Emperor was wearing nothing; the spell was broken.

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May 21, 2012



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