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Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections

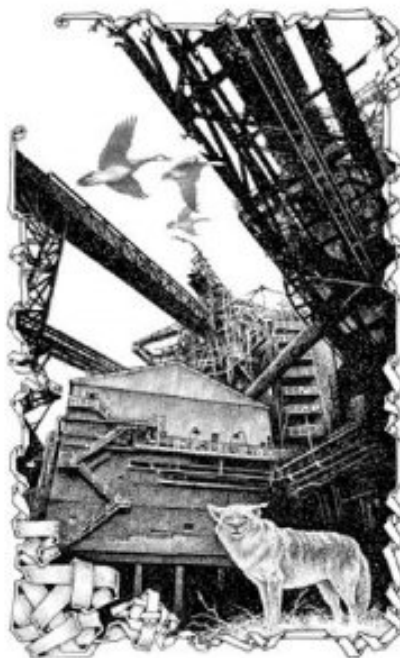
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AGAINST CIVILIZATION

READINGS AND REFLECTIONS
ENLARGED EDITION

EDITED BY JOHN ZERZAN



"Read it and you will never think of civilization
in the same way again." — Kirkpatrick Sale

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From Brand: Feral House : Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. READ THIS ONE DOZENS OF TIMESBy Michael TsarionA masterly collection of essays on eco-psychology, sustainable living, permaculture, decadent societies, ancient civilizations, and so-called "primitivism."2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy david gaskinsthis book really makes me rethink all that i have learned about the advancements of man.2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Great selections!By Eric BarrIt can be hard for me to get all the way through a non-

fiction book. This one is a collection of short essays though, so its easy to read one or two essays, put it down for a while, and pick it back up later and keep going with the next one. There are so many great ones. I started dog-earring my favorites and ended up marking almost half of them.

Read it and you will never think of civilization in the same way again. Kirkpatrick Sale This anthology about "the pathology of civilization" offers insight into how progress and technology have led to emptiness and alienation.

". . . a new anthology edited by the anarchist philosopher John Zerzan, *Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections*. The book is composed of excerpts from the works of a wide range of authors who've offered radical critiques of industrial society. . . . Among my favorite excerpts is a darkly cynical piece, "Civilization is Like a Jetliner," by T. Fulano. . . . *Against Civilization* is not all poetic rage; the various contributions include reasoned analyses of the inherent contradictions of industrial capitalism, celebrations of vernacular culture, and inspiring visions of worlds beyond systematic domination and exploitation. As Kirkpatrick Sale has said of the book, 'It is its collective refusal to say 'Here is civilization: just accept it' that makes this volume so important. Read it and you will never think of civilization in the same way again.'" -- Richard Heinberg; *MuseLetter*, January 1999 "A provocative anthology presenting the likes of Freud, Friedrich Schiller, William Morris, and the Unabomber, along with bright contemporary thinkers that raises the question of whether our elaborately structured, technology-driven society creates more problems than it alleviates." -- Jay Walljasper; *Utne Reader*, March/April 1999 "Twist the popular Earth First! slogan from "Visualize Industrial Collapse" to "Actualize Industrial Collapse" and you have the gist of this new anthology from John Zerzan. To many it has seemed that John has been alone in his attack on the totality of civilization. Now the reader can see a chronology: diversity and passion from hundreds of years of resistance against the nightmare we have inherited today. This book will introduce ecologists to anarchists and anarchists to ecologists; intellectuals to activist perspectives; and vice-versa. I think Chellis Glendinning's description in her Foreword is accurate when she says "Herein the reader will discover the questions that need to be asked and insights that beg to be nurtured if humankind and the natural world as we know it are to thrive in the future. This book is that important." -- Chris Kortright; *Feral: A Journal Toward Wildness*, Spring 1999 From the Publisher Well known for his anarchist critique of technology and his work on the origins of our contemporary society in crisis, John Zerzan offers an anthology of critical commentary on civilization itself, from the Greeks to the Unabomber. From the Author Discontent with civilization has been with us all along, but is coming on now with a new freshness and insistence, as if it were a new thing. To assail civilization itself would be scandalous, but for the conclusion, occurring to more and more people, that it may be civilization that is the fundamental scandal. I won't dwell here on the fact of the accelerating destruction of the biosphere. And perhaps equally obvious is the mutilation of "human nature," along with outer nature. Freud decided that the fullness of civilization would bring the zenith of universal neurosis. In this he was evidently a bit sanguine, too mild in his prognosis. It is impossible to scan a newspaper and miss the malignancy of daily life. See the multiple homicides, the 600 percent increase in teen suicide over the past thirty years; count the ways to be heavily drugged against reality; ponder what is behind the movement away from literacy. One could go on almost endlessly charting the boredom, depression, immiseration. The concept of progress has been in trouble for a few decades, but the general crisis is deepening now at a quickening pace. From this palpable extremity it is clear that something is profoundly wrong. How far back did this virus originate? How much must change for us to turn away from the cultural death march we are on? At the same time, there are some who cling to the ideal of civilization, as to a promise yet to be fulfilled. Norbert Elias, for example, declared that "civilization is never finished and always endangered." More persuasive is the sobering view of what civilization has already wrought, as in today's deadening and deadly convergence of technological processes and mass society. Richard Rubenstein found that the Holocaust "bears witness to the advance of civilization," a chilling point further developed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman argued that history's most gruesome moment so far was made possible by the inner logic of civilization, which is, at bottom, division of labor. This division of labor, or specialization, works to dissolve moral accountability as it contributes to technical achievement--in this case, to the efficient, industrialized murder of millions. But isn't this too grim a picture to account for all of it? What of other aspects, like art, music, literature--are they not also the fruit of civilization? To return to Bauman and his point about Nazi genocide, Germany was after all the land of Goethe and Beethoven, arguably the most cultural or spiritual European country. Of course we try to draw strength from beautiful achievements, which often offer cultural criticism as well as aesthetic uplift. Does the presence of these pleasures and consolations make an indictment of the whole less unavoidable? Speaking of unfulfilled ideals, however, it is valid to point out that civilization is indeed "never finished and always endangered." And that is because civilization has always been imposed, and necessitates continual conquest and repression. Marx and Freud, among others, agreed on the incompatibility of humans and nature, which is to say, the necessity of triumph over nature, or work. Obviously related is Kenneth Boulding's judgment that the achievements of civilization "have been paid for at a very high cost in human degradation, suffering, inequality, and dominance." There hasn't been unanimity as to civilization's most salient characteristic. For Morgan it was writing; for Engels, state power; for Childe, the rise of

cities. Renfrew nominated insulation from nature as most fundamental. But domestication stands behind all these manifestations, and not just the taming of animals and plants, but also the taming of human instincts and freedoms. Mastery, in various forms, has defined civilization and gauged human achievement. To name, to number, to time, to represent--symbolic culture is that array of masteries upon which all subsequent hierarchies and confinements rest. Civilization is also separation from an original wholeness and grace. The poor thing we call our "human nature" was not our first nature; it is a pathological condition. All the consolations and compensations and prosthetics of an ever more technicized and barren world do not make up for the emptiness. As Hilzheimer and others came to view domestications of animals as juvenilizations, so also are we made increasingly dependent and infantilized by the progress of civilization. Little wonder that myths, legends, and folklore about gardens of Eden, Golden Ages, Elysian fields, lands of Cockaigne and other primitivist paradises are a world-wide phenomenon. This universal longing for an aboriginal, unalienated state has also had its dark flip side, a remarkable continuity of apocalyptic beliefs and prophets of doom. Two sides of the same coin of a deep unhappiness with civilization. Centuries of the persistence of utopias in the literature and politics of the West have more recently been replaced by a strong dystopian current, as hope seems to be giving way to nightmare apprehensions. This shift began in earnest in the nineteenth century, when virtually every major figure--e.g. Goethe, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Melville, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Dostoevski--expressed doubt about the vitality and future of culture. At the time that technology was becoming a world-wide unifying force, social scientists such as Durkheim and Masaryk noted that melancholy and suicide increased precisely with the forward movement of civilization. In terms of the current intellectual domestication, postmodernism, despite a certain rhetoric of rebellion, is merely the latest extension of the modern civilizing process. For its moral cowardice as well as its zero degree of content, a horrific present is thus captured all too well. Meanwhile, Forbes magazine's 75th anniversary cover story explored "Why We Feel So Bad When We Have it so Good," and the simple graffito "I can't breathe!" captures our contemporary reality with precision. From every camp, voices counsel that there can be no turning back from the path of progress, the unfolding of still more high-tech consumerist desolation. How hollow they sound, as we consider what has been lost and what may yet, one desperately hopes, be recovered.