

Derrick Jensen and John Zerzan  
discuss the protests against the  
World Trade Organization in  
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John Zerzan: Just today I was talking with a guy from the New York Times, and though I don't know exactly what his focus is, he's much more interesting than I would have thought. He understands that there's a big disconnect going on, and has for a long time been predicting that there would be an upsurge in resistance to the system. In that sense Seattle wasn't surprising to him.

There are a couple of interesting things about this. The first is that this wasn't some anarchist saying this, but instead someone who works for a major mainstream corporate media outlet—and I have to say it didn't seem like he was blowing smoke, but instead saying what he believed. And the second is that he comes to this from a very non-political, non-theoretical perspective. His perception of the disconnect comes from his being very interested especially in what the youth are feeling. It's kind of like where Adorno talks about the need which stands behind philosophy. . . .

Derrick Jensen: What do you mean by disconnect?

JZ: I think what he sees is that there is a growing number of kids especially who see through the happy face of the system to the nightmare beneath, both the horror and misery it causes for example in the Third World and in the natural world, and also the emptiness and misery of the lives it forces all of us to lead.

We hear again and again from the media in response to criticism of the system: "Well, gee, things have never been better. What are you guys talking about? Everything is wonderful. Everybody's happy. I don't get it." But of course that sort of ridiculing of criticism is part of the nightmare itself. And the ridicule cannot continue forever. Something is happening that won't allow it to.

DJ: What, exactly, is happening?



JZ: People are beginning to come together and say that ~~as we~~ they'll no longer put up with all this emptiness that's galloping along, because they're realizing that they no longer ~~will~~ have to lead miserable lives in the service of a system that is destroying the planet. They're realizing that they no longer have to accept a media, political, economic system that refuses to acknowledge the reality we all face on a daily basis.

I was talking to that guy today about the surge in school-yard shootings, and he was just as appalled as I am at the ridiculously superficial discourse surrounding Columbine and Thurston. Now they're talking about video games as a potential cause. Their use of any ridiculous dodge to avoid talking about the pathology of the system, to avoid even scratching the surface, really is criminal. I'm not using that word lightly.

How long can we go along pretending civilization makes sense, that there's any future here, any answers here? I can't even hardly find anyone to defend the system anymore, unless they're paid ideologues like politicians or those who run the media. That was what was so refreshing about the guy today.

Back to the resistance. I would say that given the palpably worsening lifeworld on every level, the most surprising thing about the burgeoning resistance is how long it's taken to get to this point.

DJ: You mentioned Seattle. I thought what happened there was one of the most hopeful and best things I've seen in a long time.

JZ: I've been thinking about this a lot, and I feel that Seattle already has gone past the movement of the sixties. You could say that one swallow doesn't make a summer, but people understand now some things that for the most part



we didn't back then. I was very involved in the sixties, in Berkeley and San Francisco, and I've long felt we didn't even scratch the surface of what was necessary. But in Seattle, already at the dawn of this new movement, people were plumbing the depths of understanding how far oppression goes. I don't want to rhapsodize or magnify it without that much evidence, but it just feels to me that there are an awful lot of people who are really close to breaking through all the proscriptions and rules holding them back.

The whole thing in Seattle was very intense, and something that impressed me very much was that even given the widely disparate styles of protest, all of the protesters held in common tremendous courage, commitment, and endurance. I saw a tremendous willingness to take some very serious risks, whether we're talking about black-clad anarchists committing felonies, or the more rule-abiding protesters facing down cops while getting gassed from three directions. Protesters clogged intersections around the convention center for hours, hanging tough until the cops finally lost it because they saw these people weren't going to give up. And still the people hung in there. I was so proud of the resisters. They could have been beaten to death, yet they didn't give up.

DJ: I've read first person accounts of people getting shot point blank in the face with rubber bullets, of cops breaking jaws, of people being placed naked in restraining chairs.

JZ: Well, the brutality of the system was there to see as well as the courage.

I really think—and I could be wrong here—that what happened in Seattle didn't have all that much to do with WTO. I think there was a sense that the WTO is just the tip of the iceberg, that people generally knew that WTO or no WTO doesn't really change anything.

DJ: I don't know if they think about the future, but certainly the cops and the military defend it.

JZ: Well, that's probably so. Maybe I'm just indulging in wishful thinking.

But it's also true that during a lot of strikes, particularly in the nineteenth century, the militia refused to kill strikers, and in some cases actually defected. Whole regiments. Obviously that didn't happen in Seattle, and maybe it's just a fantasy, but at some point there will have to be some police who say, "Fuck it, I'm not going to shoot at unarmed people to defend the corporate state."

Cops don't have it easy. You realize that when you look at the rates of alcoholism, suicide, abuse, and so on. Where is their satisfaction? Their level of immiseration may suggest that their allegiance may not go that far. I'm not saying they're all going to take off their clothes, dance naked in the streets, and hug trees, but nor am I so sure they're down for the whole nine yards.

DJ: I want to be clear on something you said a moment ago. Do you think the system will collapse on its own, or do we need to give it a push? And if we need to push, where?

JZ: I think that unfortunately it's not going to collapse on its own. But I do think, as I said, that it's a shell with only an eroding base of support. So the question of where to strike is a good and increasingly crucial one. I would turn that around and ask, Where not to strike? The whole thing is so destructive and worthy of condemnation and dispatching that I don't know any part of it that's worth saving. That understanding—and the understanding that the system is killing the planet—will really free you up to act in appropriate and effective ways.



JZ: It's very scary.

Having decided that, I think the next question—or maybe in some ways this question even comes first—is: what would it take to break the hold of the terrorism of consumer culture, where the only choices and the only satisfactions left are those provided by consumerism? Or you could phrase the question differently: why is it that some people have already decided that consumerism meaningless and hollow? Why do we see a film like *Fight Club*, which is ferociously anti-consumer? The central message of that film is incredible. I'm not saying it doesn't have any flaws, but it's very clear that a life that finds its satisfactions in consuming is completely unhappy and absurd.

DJ: Let's talk about violence. It is already a given in our lives, not only because of things like *Columbine* and *Thurston*, and not only because the military is essential worldwide to keep resources flowing into the corporate economy, but because there simply is a lot of violence in this culture. How much violence do you believe will be necessary—I hate to use that word, because so often violence is excused as necessary—to take down civilization.

JZ: Frankly I'm still hopeful that the dominant setup may be closer to its last legs than we think. If we just know how to push, it may have less support than it appears to at the moment. So I think it's not out of the question that with just the right pressure applied at just the right places—and I'm not even talking about violence—the whole thing could collapse. I no longer take it as a given that civilization has this big reservoir of support, and that taking it down will be this endless bloody struggle. Who will really defend it? Who supports it and believes it and thinks that it has any answers or any future?

DJ: What were the protests about then?


JZ: They were about everything. Here's an anecdote that still cracks me up whenever I think about it. I saw a middle-aged guy arguing with some college-aged kid. The older guy was bringing up all the details on what's wrong with the WTO, that it's not transparent, anti-democratic, and so on, and was making all these suggestions for how we should fiddle with the WTO procedures. The kid heard him out, and finally just looked him over and said, "I don't know all these details you're talking about, but I do know I hate rich people." It blew the other guy away. They were from two different planets. On the one hand you've got the liberals who endlessly fret over every little detail and miss the bigger picture, and on the other you've got people who say, "It's the whole thing that's fucked."

DJ: Let's go back to what you said about the sixties not scratching the surface.

JZ: In the sixties there seemed to be a general sense that the system was somehow reformable, or even if it wasn't, that the revolution wouldn't be that hard. The winds were blowing a different way, we thought. But the great changes we were seeking never came. And so in the seventies some of us began to ask ourselves what we meant by revolution in the first place. What does the concept mean? What would it take to really change things? Were we even on the right track? We asked these questions in great measure because it was becoming increasingly clear that our work was insufficient. Now, some thirty years later, after three decades of defeat and damage, we have less idealism and optimism, but I think we also now have fewer illusions. We're beginning to gain an understanding of the depth of the problem, and of how far we have to go. And I think some people are sensing this in very profound ways these days.



DJ: How do you mean all this?

JZ: I'm not saying people didn't have a clue back then as to what kind of transformation would be desirable. But there were a lot of things we didn't think nearly enough about. Technology, for example. People didn't think about what technology really is, and how deeply the system is embedded in it (and vice versa), how far it incarnates the system of capital. That's partly because society hadn't been so technologized at that point. But now real experience is on the verge of extinction. There's almost no unmediated experience left. So it's very hard on some level to at least not see that life—the texture of life, the wholeness of life, that sense of having direct experience—is being leached away. We are witnessing and participating in what DeFord  called the movement from lived life to represented life.

Another thing we didn't think enough about—and this is closely related to technology—is media. But now you really can't avoid discussing it. The entire image machine urges us to consume all these images of life: to consume representations instead of to live. This is pretty well known, whereas I'm not sure that was the case thirty years ago.

Another good thing is the degree to which people increasingly realize that the system doesn't foster these questions as part of the discourse of what society is and what it should be.

DJ: It cannot, because if it did it would collapse immediately.

JZ: I think that's right.

DJ: What would you like to see people do in the short run?

JZ: On the one hand, the system is so fucked that almost anything we can do would be welcome, whether it's protect-

JZ: Insofar as people understand that the whole setup is toxic from one end to the other, from its very foundation, then the rest just follows. In other words, the first thing we need to do is recognize the craziness of playing by the system's rules. To imagine that kneeling down and getting arrested, then paying your fine, will actually stop or significantly slow the monstrous development of capital technology and civilization is just crazy.

The future of the environmental movement I think depends on realizing that it has to be broadened and deepened. Its serious needs to be called into question. For example, I've thought a fair amount about the Earth First! movement, and how its rallying cry is "No compromise in defense of mother earth." But what does that mean? Compromise? How do we even know what compromise is? It's a social concept. And we're all compromised, we're implicitly part of the system. I'm not saying that our own culpability needs to paralyze us, but that we need to really examine what we mean, and what we want.

DJ: Okay, then. To remove this from abstraction, what would it take to shut down Weyerhaeuser? Or moving back up one level of abstraction, what would it take to shut down the timber industry? And then the next level: what would it take to shut down the whole machine?

JZ: I think the first thing is that we need to decide that's really what we want. That's a very courageous and I think sensible position. Given the destructiveness of the system, I think it's really the only sensible position. And there are a lot of people who would agree with it. But there are also an awful lot who are afraid of that position.

DJ: I agree with it wholeheartedly, and it scares the hell out of me.



I really respected that openness. So many people are so schooled in this liberal reformist doctrinaire stuff, and I have to admit that it wasn't necessarily the easiest time to consider a whole new point of view. We're all defensive when our worldview is challenged—at least I know I often am—yet some people were able to open themselves up.

DJ: Something else I find remarkable is that so many of these people who were opposed to the black-clad anarchists probably support the Zapatistas, and say "Hooray for Crazy Horse."

JZ: That's for sure. There's a flyer that somebody put out here in Eugene that says, "You denounce the masked anarchists and support the masked Zapatistas, and to a very large degree they're fighting for the same thing." What's the deal?

DJ: Let's return to the question of revolution. How would you envision that happening?

JZ: I was talking with someone last night who said, "One of the big questions about Seattle seems to be: how would things have been different if the black-clad anarchists hadn't been there "messing up our protest"? But then she said, "Why don't people turn it around? Why don't they ask: What if there were another hundred black-block people, smashing it up? What if there were five hundred? What if there were 5000?" Just think of what might have happened. What kind of possibly radical breakthrough would have begun right there?

DJ: How do you see the resistance moving from its current state? Or let's say that there already would have been 5000 of the black-block anarchists in Seattle. What's the next step after that?

ing biodiversity or working to help battered women. But all of those are essentially defending ourselves against the onslaught of the system. What would it mean to take the offensive?

That's a more difficult question, because in some ways it's hard to see those immediate practical steps. I think that's because the whole project is so enormous. But I'm pretty clear that the project we face is largely one of removal, of deconstruction, of taking away all these separations and mediations and intrusions. And that involves—and this is where it gets really tough—taking down this enormous ensemble of interlocking institutions. The fact that the system is so tightly interlocking—such a totality—is one reason it is so effective.

DJ: I don't know how, but it strikes me also that this condition of being interlocking could provide a key toward taking it down. . . .

JZ: That's intriguing.

DJ: Back to what we should do. . . .

JZ: The other day I was reading this 'zine called "Practical Anarchy," and I remember thinking, "Well, I wish there was a practical answer." But our project has to be utopian in some senses, because otherwise we're still on the system's own terrain, still operating under the illusion that we can somehow work it out within this totality instead of breaking its hold over us and removing it.

DJ: Let's get more specific. Do you approve, disapprove, or take no position on the property destruction that took place as part of the resistance in Seattle? I mean both morally and tactically.



**JZ:** I guess I would put it this way. It's very hard to see how proceeding by the rules of the game—by the approved protest rituals that the system has handed out—is going to accomplish the removal of the system. I don't see how people can actually think that the system is going to hand out the rules for its own demise. It would be nice if polite protest and respecting the rules of the game, including the rules of property, would be enough. But civil disobedience remains exactly that: civil to the system. And what kind of disobedience is it that accepts the enemy's notions of what is and isn't acceptable?

**DJ:** There are a lot of people who've equated the destruction of property with violence.

**JZ:** I just don't understand how people can miss that incredibly important distinction. You can't violate an inanimate structure or object. Violence against any living creature has almost nothing in common with damaging property. Crossing the line to violate the sanctity of property is in no way the same as crossing the line to violate the sanctity of life. In fact our whole system, based on the sanctity of property, is the most murderous system around, not content to simply kill humans through both economic and military means, but bent on destroying all life on the planet.

I would draw a distinction, too, between corporate and personal property. There's all the difference in the world between breaking a window at Starbucks and heaving a rock into my neighbor's living room. It still surprises me how many people say, "Well, that means you'll come and break my windows." That seems like such a non sequitur, but it needs to be acknowledged, and it needs to be answered. That's not what we're talking about at all. Why would anyone go and break your window? To even ask that question is to suggest that the actions are random, not framed by any vision, critique, or analysis. It's crazy. Are you so heavily identified with

the system that you think because someone broke windows at Starbucks, next they're going to shoot you, and then your dog for good measure? Get real.

But those of us who are part of the resistance must accept as part of the challenge the fact that these issues haven't been brought out for people to think about, have been occluded from consideration. And we need to change that by talking about the issues directly and honestly.

**DJ:** It seems that some of the strongest criticisms of those who are willing to destroy corporate property comes not even from the corporate press, but from other protesters.

**JZ:** That's true, and it strikes me as absurd. I have no problems with anyone who is brave enough to do civil disobedience, to sit there in front of the cops with their gas and their rubber bullets. I would never attempt to censor them. I may disagree with them, and tell them I think they're wasting their time, but I respect their right to protest however they want. But so often these same people attempt to disallow any tactics they disagree with.

Many of these ostensible pacifists actually became violent in their defense of corporate property, tackling people and shrieking at them about the need for nonviolence. They were remarkably strident, and working overtime to protect the system and to protect their agreed-upon rituals.

But I have to tell you that even in the middle of this wild, heightened context I saw some very interesting conversations. When faced with these people who were so strenuously objecting to breaking the rules, some of the black-clad anarchists would say something like, "Well, do you think civil disobedience will really be enough?" And I actually saw some people change their minds on the spot. I heard them say, "Oh, I never even thought of that before."