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Anarchy After September 11

John Zerzan

Every day it is clearer that the global cancer of capital and technology devours more of life in every sphere. More species, cultures, and ecosystems are under attack, at every level. The cancer of the megamachine is always at work, consuming its host. And if it ever stops expanding, economic alarm bells go off worldwide.

This relentless colonization/globalization has ignited resistance everywhere. In this painful twilight struggle, as the crisis deepens, some of this opposition has taken the desperate form of religious fundamentalism. From this desperation arises the ultimate gesture of suicidal violence, hopeless and indefensible on any level.

Novelist V.S. Naipal reminds us that “The world is getting more and more out of reach of simple people who have only religion. And the more they depend on religion, which of course solves nothing, the more the world gets out of reach.”

But as New York Times Magazine writer Joseph Lelyveld (10/28/01) discovered through interviews with families and supporters, suicide bombers are recruited by a promise with widespread appeal among disaffected youth: “better a meaningful death than a pointless life.”

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Heidegger described our period of history as one of “consummate meaninglessness.” The loss of the possibility of personal fulfillment is hardly confined to the Third World. In fact, the standardized barrenness of the First World is quite as devastating, in its own way. In the postmodern void that is the United States today, tens of millions of all ages take anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication. It’s not unimaginable that before long, psychotropic drugs will be routinely prescribed for everyone, beginning in infancy. And this is just one example in a list of well-known pathologies that bridge the personal and social spheres. Why are people willing, even eager, to accept a drug-induced state as normal in themselves and their children? Perhaps because of fear, more widespread lately. Adorno wrote penetratingly about the fear of death: “The less people really live or, perhaps more correctly, the more they become aware that they have not really lived the more abrupt and frightening death becomes for them, and the more it appears as a terrible accident.”

For those in the U.S. on the threshold of adult life, suicide is the third leading cause of death. For every two murders there are three suicides. Painful life pointless life.

Ignoring these omnipresent realities, the *American Spectator* (Sept 2001) focused on the anti-technology aspect of the 9/11 suicide hijackings. “Luddites Over Broadway” argues that only technology can save us, since “nature is brutal, deadly, and Darwinian.” Opposing “creativity” to the “Luddite” sensibility of the attackers, AS argues that creativity is our key endowment. Asserting that creativity flourishes only under capitalism, AS reveals what kind of “creativity” they’re talking about — fueled by instrumental reason, and grounded in domination.

In no way, in my opinion, does the anti-technological, Luddite, primitivist vision of anarchy have anything to do with the viciously misogynist and theocratic Bin Laden types. Which is not to say that the relentless technologizing of the world should not be indicted and reversed. As psychotherapist Robert Marchesani wrote

recently, “The more technology we have, the more we seem to be burdening people and dehumanizing them, perhaps making them into these pieces of technology themselves so that they can’t feel anything anymore.”

In Turkey, according to some anarchists there, a bridge from religious fundamentalism to primitivism has been built, at least by a few. They have traded the escapist (and therefore always reactionary) utopia of the afterlife for the effort to confront technology and capital in the here and now. A very hopeful, if so far inadequately discussed phenomenon.

About two years ago (Tikkun, Jan/Feb 1999), David Ehrenfeld predicted “The Coming Collapse of the Age of Technology.” His summary: “Techno-economic globalization is nearing its apogee; the system is self-destructing. There is only a short but very damaging period of expansion left.”

To redeem the collapse and avoid further victimization, we must find renewed resolve and solidarity. It’s crucial that we undertake the inevitable deconstruction of technology energetically and consciously. Those who elect to passively endure ever-worsening personal, social, and planetary conditions, or to flame out in suicidal acts of terror, are fundamentally powerless against a massively destructive system.

“No one could have believed that these massive towers could just come down like this,” declared an incredulous CNN reporter on September 11. They did fall, social systems and even civilizations fall, this order will fall. Creative resistance and resilience have never been so needed. Never has there been so much at stake; never has the prospect of liberation from the no-future death march of civilization been perhaps more feasible.