

## Book Review

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Review of *Endgame: Volume I – The Problem of Civilization* and *Endgame: Volume II – Resistance*, by Derrick Jensen. Seven Stories Press, 2006, 929 pp.  
\$24.50 CDN each.

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Derrick Jensen begins *Endgame* by asking do you believe it is possible that our culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living? Having asked many this question and never receiving an affirmative response, Jensen sets out to examine the insanity, violence, and unsustainability of civilization and strategies for taking it all down or accelerating its eminent collapse. Interweaving accounts of personal experiences and conversations with a discussion of twenty premises, for over 900 pages he presents what is largely an anarcho-primitivist position: civilization cannot be reformed—there is no hope for this culture; the only moral response is to completely dismantle it.

Jensen defines civilization as

culture—that is, a complex of stories, institutions, and artifacts—that both lead to and emerge from the growth of cities . . . cities being defined—so as to distinguish them from camps, villages, and so on—as people living more or less permanently in one place in densities high enough to require routine importation of food and other necessities of life.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from the work of Lewis Mumford, he lists a number of the attributes that characterize cities: centralization of political power, separation of classes, lifetime division of labour, mechanization of production, magnification of military power, economic exploitation of the weak, and universal introduction of slavery and forced labour for both individual and military purposes. He argues that in order for cities to operate they must rely on the exploitation of resources and labour far outside of their land base and thus, are inherently unsustainable. In

contrast, he looks to indigenous hunter-gatherer cultures for insights on other ways of viewing and interacting in the world sustainably. Indians, for example, illustrate how one can participate in the larger-than-human community as a contrast to the contemporary exploitation of the natural world as resources; the Indians ate salmon and entered into a relationship with the salmon whereby they gave respect to the salmon in exchange for the flesh. As illustrated here and elaborated throughout his books, Jensen, like many environmental writers, posits the city as the antithesis of nature, and pits the organic against the artificial, and, in the process, a normative ideal is inscribed in the moral order of nature.<sup>2</sup>

To some extent the first volume is an elaboration of Jensen's twenty premises; in the second volume he details strategies and tactics for dismantling civilization. Yet, as Jensen does not follow a linear style of writing, throughout the two volumes he jumps from one topic to the next with little connection between them, and then often returns to further explore many of these same topics later in the books. Nonetheless, there are a number of themes that can be highlighted that are woven throughout the two books including: civilization is abusive, exploitative and insane; there is no place for hope; violence in opposition to the injustices of the powerful is justifiable; we've overshot the planet's carrying capacity; we are misguided in our separation of selves from each other and the natural world; we are delusional in thinking that the problems created by civilization can be fixed by individual actions or by piecemeal steps; we all pay to subsidize the corporate destruction of the world; and the crux of this culture's problem is our belief that controlling and abusing the natural world is justifiable. As a means of illustration I will elaborate on a few of these themes.

Using a *Dear Abbey* column that listed the warning signs of potential abusers as a springboard, Jensen draws strong parallels between an abusive spouse or parent and how civilization treats the natural world and how we treat each other. Quoting from some of the most respected writers in the fields of trauma and psychotherapy, he makes the case that the entire culture is so violent and traumatized that we operate primarily out of fear and detachment. As the work of Judith Herman shows that the effects of long-term domestic violence often manifest as amnesia, a sense of helplessness, identification with the abuser, and a belief that all relationships are based on force, Jensen makes the case that this explains contemporary culture's failure to act to protect the natural world, come to our own self-defence against the powerful, and rally to help those among us who are the blatant victim's of industrial civilization—indigenous cultures, other species, the poor, and so on.

Because we have been inculcated by civilization to believe that belongings are more important than belonging, and that relationships are based on dominance, violence, and exploitation, we are driven by an urge to destroy life. Deadened inside we set up cityscapes where anything wild and free has been caged, we occupy and try to control other people and lands, and we blow each other up in fabricated wars of defence that are really greedy resource grabs. He argues that we fall into the pattern of abused children in response to this violence and destruction in that we internalize the responsibility. Hence, we focus on what individual actions we can take to ameliorate deforestation, climate change, or the loss of species, rather than focusing on the system that is responsible for the clear cutting, creating communities and transportation routes that depend on cars, and the investment of billions in the military. Jensen insists that while it is vital to make lifestyle choices that mitigate the damage we cause by being members of civilization, it is self indulgent, self righteous, and self important to focus our attention and efforts primarily on making ourselves better rather than focusing on the system and those in power. Moreover, he adds, it only serves the interests of those in power by keeping the attention off of them.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Jensen is against all forms of violence. Throughout the books Jensen devotes pages responding to his pacifist critics who in responding to the violence he advocates address him with phrases such as “you can’t use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house,” or “violence begets violence.” Although, in the beginning of *Volume I*, Jensen is in search of moral absolutes, he later makes the case repeatedly that morality is contextual and hence, violence in some circumstances is warranted. Specifically, violence is an appropriate response to prevent the further destruction, torture or exploitation of those you love, especially when the perpetrators of the destruction repeatedly ignore you pleas and reasoning to stop. The pacifism Gandhi advocated was a death wish that fails to account for the kind of abusive and psychopathological dynamics that underlie the Nazi holocaust, domestic abuse, and the ongoing exploitation and destruction of the natural world.

Jensen also writes about being criticized for hope-bashing. His position is that he doesn’t have much hope for civilization and thinks that is a good thing, for hope keeps us believing in the system: technology will save us, the system will change, God or Jesus will save us, etc. Jensen argues that hope serves those in power because “Hope is a longing for a future condition for which you have no agency. It means you are essentially powerless.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast, when you stop hoping for external assistance, or believing that somehow the system will self correct, then

action occurs as you begin working out ways to resolve the current situation. Being hopeless makes you more, not less, effective because you begin to look for solutions to the problems you face.

Jensen recounts how every morning he gets up he asks himself whether he should sit down and write or go blow up a dam. He writes a lot about blowing dams or taking down cell phone towers but has never done either. These are the rally calls he makes to dismantle civilization and in the process save salmon, sturgeon, songbirds, and many other species. While the title of his second volume is resistance, the second book is really more of the same from *Volume I* and does not provide much more detail about the appropriate structure of the resistance or the collective efforts for dismantling the system. Instead Jensen discusses locating the fulcrums, pivot points, and bottlenecks or kinks in the system where things get backlogged, as well as placing the powerful in situations where they have no choice but to change, for this is the only way they will do so. Jensen is purposely not prescriptive. Instead, he advocates that there is much work to be done and not everyone needs to be blowing up dams or taking down cell phone towers. Someone has to teach the people whose electrical towers will be dismantled how to cook over open fires, and someone to teach how to gather medicinal plants from the forest, and so on, and people simply need to listen to their landbase and their hearts to determine what they should be doing. The one exception to these general pronouncements is found in the short chapter, "Fewer than Jesus had Apostles," in which he recounts a conversation with some hackers about inflicting serious economic damage on a corporation though messing with their computer systems. In this chapter are revealed some very specific fulcrums and pivot points in the computer and economic systems and how to easily access them with a little persistence, computer savvy, and creativity.

Jensen's shrill call to action is warranted. I share in being dumbfounded how, in spite of the glaciers melting more rapidly than most scientists predicted, an exponential rise in cancer to levels (one in two people being inflicted with the disease in their lifetimes), the mass extinction of species (including 90 per cent of large fish having disappeared and a third of the remaining mammals likely to be lost in a three decades), yet civilization seems to be busily churning on as if there is no imminent crisis. Throughout the books Jensen draws attention to a myriad of the absurd manifestations of contemporary culture to raise attention to this dilemma. A few examples he cites include: most of the rivers of southern England are so full of hormones that half the male fish—in some cases all—are changing sexes; and we produce PVS medical devices to treat cancer and then dispose of them in hospital incinerators that emits toxic fumes that eventually will be someone else's cancer;

and Shell Oil sponsored competition offering \$20,000 for the best 2000 word essay on the topic of “Do we need nature?”. Jensen’s key message is important: we need to fundamentally, radically, and immediately change how we conceptualize and interact with the natural world and each other.

While there are snippets of insight throughout *Endgame*, overall I found these volumes disappointing; they fail to present a thoughtful and informed critique of many of the topics he raises or to provide a sustained, carefully constructed cultural, social, and political analysis to examine the ecological and social calamities that befall the planet. Instead, Jensen uses generalities, contestable statements, and naïve pronouncements to make emphatic judgements, and he fails in many instances to apply to his own thinking and actions the critique of contemporary society he constructs. For example, Jensen states that “the only sustainable level of technology is the Stone Age.”<sup>4</sup> If as Jensen claims, central to the insanity of civilization is a belief about ourselves and how we should interact with the rest of the world, then reverting back to Stone Age technology seems to be a rather simplistic and naïve proposal. As philosophers and historians of technology like Ursula Franklin and Jacques Ellul have detailed, technology is not simply a set of tools but is a system: “It entails far more than its individual material components. Technology involves organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations, and most of all, a mindset.”<sup>5</sup> So while wiping out the electrical grid may result in many of us not being able to spend our days on computers, subways, and in front of televisions watching inane programming from places we know nothing about, it will not in effect stop people from building more machines that may be just as ecologically harmful. By extension, it is problematic to generalize about all hunter-gather societies as being exemplary ecologically-attuned residents of the planet. As Ronald Wright details, the Upper Paleolithic people were more than able and relentless hunters creating slaughter sites industrial in size: a thousand mammoths at one and more than 100,000 horses at another. Driving the animals across steep terrains, they pushed herds over the cliffs leaving piles of animals to rot.<sup>6</sup> More alarming than Jensen’s broad brush stroke attempts to pinpoint moral markers is his disregard for the social justice implications of what he is proposing. He instructs people to buy land for this will provide them with a better chance to survive the inevitable chaos that ensues when civilization topples. While Jensen details repeatedly and in great detail how, when the powerful in society are threatened or their property destroyed, the powerful kill or destroy the lives of those below, it seems naïve to think that during the collapse of

civilization, he or anyone not in this powerful group is going to escape the reach of these elite or the horrific disaster that will follow this event.

Jensen's extreme position has its role in raising attention to the severity and insanity of the environmental and social crisis that currently exists and will surely worsen, however, his analysis and strategies for resistance are largely lacking in critical depth. Given his apparent popularity among some, a chapter or two from *Endgame* could serve as a catalyst for a lively discussion or debate about the current ecological and social crisis in an undergraduate class, however, reading the entire two books would not. Due to the repetitive structure of the books, his basic points can be gleaned in far fewer than 900 pages and reading a few chapters would keep his readers somewhat intrigued by his position rather than annoyed by his failure to save trees by not containing what, after several hundred pages, begins to read like a long-winded rant.

## References

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Page 17.

<sup>2</sup> This is a general characterization made about environmentally minded social theorists and socially minded environmental theorists by Nike Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erick Swyngedouw, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Page 330.

<sup>4</sup> Page 119.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, 1990, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 2004, 38.